

The book cover is a vibrant illustration. At the top, a large, brown and blue striped dragon's head looms over the title. To the right, a golden dragon's head with large white horns is shown. In the center, a paladin with red hair, wearing blue robes and gold armor, holds a glowing book and a sword. To the left, a squirrel-like character and a fox-like character are perched on a tree branch. Below them, a mouse-like character is on the ground. To the right of the paladin, a blue-skinned elf-like character stands. In the bottom right, a gnomish character with a large white beard and a blue sash is shown. The background is a dark blue sky with a full moon and a small planet. The entire cover is framed by a decorative border of orange and yellow leaves.

WORLD
WARCRAFT

FOLK & FAIRY TALES

OF AZEROTH

Garth Nix • Catherynne M. Valente • Christie Golden • Kami Garcia • Madeleine Roux
L.L. McKinney • Tamsyn Muir • Molly Knox Ostertag • E.C. Myers
Alyssa Wong, and more!



FOLK & FAIRY TALES OF AZEROTH

A decorative flourish consisting of a curved line with three small, stylized leaves or petals at the end, located at the bottom right of the title.



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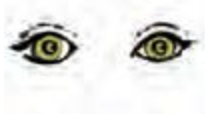




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INTRODUCTION



I suspect there's a spark in each of us that wants to make believe. In childhood we listened to bedtime stories or daydreamed on rainy days; we played the hero, the villain, and even the dragon. It was very likely that same desire that first brought you and me to Azeroth, to the sprawling world of Warcraft. With the click of a button, we were transported to frozen citadels, deep-sea empires, and cursed lands. Here we once again charted our own paths, learned the weight of honor and heroism, overcame conflict, and forged fast friendships. We discovered that our love of stories and desire to play make-believe are unbound by age.

We also found that *World of Warcraft* has its own stories to tell. I'm not referring to the Burning Legion or the Lich King or the machinations of the Old Gods. We've been a part of these massive sagas, yes, but what humble fireside adventures are we missing? The cautionary tales hollered at naughty children, the triumphant yarns spun between soldiers rallying for a fight, the romances used to soothe aching hearts yearning for connection. Stories that grow in the telling, shared before inn hearths from Kalimdor to the Eastern Kingdoms and the lands beyond. In short, how did the common folk of Azeroth play the dragon?

What follows is our attempt to bottle that essence, with stories supported by the World of Warcraft team and told by some of modern fantasy's brightest stars. Together, we spent many hours researching

established legends within the Warcraft mythos—including the people and places we thought deserved more attention—alongside harebrained ideas that ended up working far better than we could have hoped. (After all, who doesn't want to know about the goblins' bogeyman?) Real-world myths and fairy tale tropes lent their collective hands for inspiration, and many pots of tea fueled brainstorming, late-night revisions, and fascinating conversations.

The tales you're about to read take these notions and realize them as living, breathing legends, grounded in the many cultures of Azeroth but also stretching into unexplored corners. Using direction from myself, the Warcraft team, and our loremasters as a guide, the authors were free to explore Azeroth through their own vision. As such, some of the tales you'll encounter here may be rooted in canon, or they may be another traveler just telling a tall tale.

Every good fairy tale conveys a simple truth or moral lesson, and you'll find that these stories are no exception. Though the tales captured here were written with adult readers in mind, many can be enjoyed by those young and old, longtime fans of *Warcraft*, or those in search of exciting new fantasy.

The writers and artists who've brought this collection to life represent the diverse *Warcraft* playership we at Blizzard know and love, and we couldn't be more thrilled to share their creations with you. After all, no universe can be known by hearing just one voice or be told by just one tale.

So, settle in, lay down your armor, and sheathe your swords. Try reading some of the stories aloud if you like. Step into Azeroth's own fairy tales and play the dragon with us.

—Allison Irons, Editor



EYES OF THE EARTH MOTHER

BY L. L. MCKINNEY



ILLUSTRATED BY
CORY GODBEY







t is said that in the time before time, in the age before

memory, before Azeroth had the brightness of day and the darkness of night to mark her steps, the Earth Mother spent her waking hours roaming the vast emptiness of the world. Alone, she braved the shadows and the whispers that rose from the depths. She heard the Old Ones speak their deceptions, but she could not be swayed.

Still, she had cause to worry, for she was with child and knew she could not labor with nothing to safeguard her newborn children from the creeping deep. She journeyed on, searching for a place where she could safely give birth to the light of her heart, away from the corruption. Finding no such

sanctuary, she decided that she would craft a haven herself. And so she set about the task of shaping the world.

She cupped her hands to form the land. She bent her back to raise the mountains and pricked her fingers upon their peaks. Where her nails grazed the stone, sparks rose, hot and wild. Her fingers cut grooves into the earth, and from them flowed the first waters. Soon great seas and oceans stretched before her, rushing to chase the newly formed rocks and fires at the shore. Water, earth, and flame beat against one another, none of them yielding.

The Earth Mother laughed at the antics of her creation, and from her breath were loosed the winds. They cut across the land, whipping up the newly laid dust.

“Gently,” the Earth Mother bid them, but the winds were overeager and restless. And so she knelt to show them how to lighten their touch.

“Like this.” She sighed upon the shining fog that now rested along the ground and sent it spiraling into the heavens. The mists rose until they could go no higher, curling white and wispy at first, and soon thick and gray. When the clouds could hold no more, the skies opened up, and the first rains fell, heavy. The earth eagerly drank this bounty and in return offered up the grass, the brush, the trees and forests, the swamps and jungles. The winds, having learned their lesson well, played softly through the vines and branches, over the flowering glades, dancing in delight.

The Earth Mother gazed over these new works in wonder and called the elements by name. She gave names to the newborn rivers. She played games with the winds as they raced across the open plains. She lay against the still young mountains to speak at length with the stone. And, oh, how she loved to stretch her arms toward the heavens and feel the stars kiss her fingertips. All the wilds were her creation, her place of peace, her sanctuary. “You will make fine companions for my children,” she said to the elements.

The Earth Mother grew to love the elements, and they loved her. So much so that when she asked for warmth, the mountains poured out their molten hearts for her. When she was parched, the skies opened up and water dappled the ground. When she wished to hear music, the rivers whispered and the flames roared. Everything was new and radiant, brimming with her essence enough to keep the darkness of the deep at bay.

“Now,” she decided, “I can bring forth my children.”

And so the Earth Mother knelt upon the golden plains. The ground cradled her body. The rivers cooled her brow. The mountains provided shelter, and fire beat back the dark. There she labored, provided for, cared for, until finally, from her womb came the first light of day, radiant and glorious. Then came the second, gentle and luminous.

“An’she,” she whispered to the first child. “My son. May you bring life, burning and bright. And Mu’sha,” she said to the second. “My daughter. May you bring rest, tranquil and healing.”

Swift and eager, the winds carried news of the newborn children across the land and sea, and the elements rejoiced as they gathered near to bask in the light of the twins.

An’she and Mu’sha they had been named.

Sun and Moon, the elements called them.

Over time, the twins grew close with their mother’s many creations. An’she could wield fire’s light and warmth as his own, and Mu’sha danced with the waters of the tides. An’she made steadfast friends with the mountains, and Mu’sha shared secrets with the winds. The twins grew steadily in their power, soon able to influence the elements themselves. So strong was their bond that the twins were able to use the might of the elements to forge weapons so that they might spar and play: dual blades for An’she and a bow with arrows for Mu’sha.

This brought the Earth Mother joy immeasurable. With soft words and tender touches, she walked her children through the ages, hand in hand, showing them the secrets of this infant land, marveling at their play with each other and with the elements themselves.

This, she saw, was good.

And yet the Earth Mother was ever watchful, ever vigilant. Her dear children were still young, still vulnerable to the corruption that lurked in the depths. The elements kept the shadows at bay as best they could, but still the Earth Mother worried. She stood guard over the twins always, never sleeping, never looking away, always keeping them close, even with their elemental guardians so near.

Eventually, the work of creation and of giving birth and then of her ceaseless watch began to tire the Earth Mother. She grew weary and knew that she would soon need to rest. But fear ate at her still. How could she

sleep *and* protect her children? How could she keep them close, keep them safe from the darkness?

Remembering how the mountain had sheltered her while she labored, the Earth Mother took up her twins, the Sun and the Moon, and pressed them into her eyes. As she did this, first with An'she, the light of day faded, and the world finally knew night. The peace and calm that fell over the land soothed the Earth Mother's spirit.

"Sun and Moon. Night and Day. Now will I always see thee, my children." Finally, she took in Mu'sha, the light of her love finally returning to her fully.

This would keep her children safe and hidden.



“Watch over this world,” the Earth Mother said to the elements as she prepared to slumber. “Guard it against the shadows until I wake again.”

And so, the Earth Mother slept while she nurtured Sun and Moon, as she had when she carried them. Resting first with one eye shut and then the other, she kept one always open, for so great was her children’s power, their light, that it could no longer be fully contained. This restless watch, where

she was never fully asleep, denied the world the warmth that An'she had learned to wield. This cold crept across the land. It capped the mountains in ice and froze the rivers. When the rains came, they fell in the first snows of winter. Mu'sha's powers were similarly diminished by her mother's rest, and without the Moon to guide the winds through their dance, they whipped up in storms and blizzards.

When the Earth Mother had rested enough, she opened her eyes onto this altered world. She saw how the elements had changed in the absence of her children, and she very nearly wept at the sight. But then, as the light of Sun and Moon returned with her gaze, the cold storms abated, and all returned to what it once was.

This way, the beating of her heart dug deep into the earth, and the song of life it carried saturated the soil.

The elements consoled her, speaking of the new life that had arisen as a result of her time of rest. They showed her the thriving plants and animals among the melting snow to convince her that this, too, was good. And so the Earth Mother named the seasons in her time of work and her time of rest.

From her eyes, she showed her children how to guide the elements through these new seasons, how to color the leaves before letting them fall, how to bolster the fields before letting seed take root. And soon, as they had with the elements' raw power, An'she and Mu'sha could bring on the changes at will.

"Good," the Earth Mother said to her growing children. "You have shown me your strength. You have proven your power. You can withstand the dark. This world is yours. I made it for you. Watch over it, and care for all that call it home. But you must still stay safe inside my eyes."

And so it was that when the Earth Mother would take her rest, from behind her shut eyes, An'she and Mu'sha's evergrowing power would tend the changes of the world, calling the seasons to their rightful time. The twins nestled in their mother's head together, always near each other, their light shining across the land from beneath her eyelashes. And when their mother

would wake, their radiance would greet her and the precious world below with joy.

To see and feel her children grow and prosper greatly pleased the Earth Mother and filled her with such love. It brought her joy immeasurable, and she wished to share this happiness with her children. So when it came time for her to slumber next, she stretched over the land, the golden plains cradling her as she slept. This way, the beating of her heart dug deep into the earth, and the song of life it carried saturated the soil. When next the Earth Mother awoke, she found new life huddled in the shadow of her bosom.

“Come,” she called to these first children of the plains. “See all that awaits you.”

Sensing this new life, An’she and Mu’sha shimmered and marveled.

“There are so many,” Mu’sha whispered.

“What will we call them?” An’she asked.

The Earth Mother plucked wheat from the golden plains and sprinkled it over her new progeny. “Shu’halo,” she murmured. “You are my love made flesh, and I brought you forth so my children would know you. An’she, Mu’sha, my Sun and Moon: teach them what I have taught you, so that they may care for the land and commune with the elements. That they may see my love in you and in all things.”

And so it was that Sun and Moon taught the shu’halo—who came to be known as the tauren—all that they knew. How to call on the elements, to take gifts from the bounty of the land to make homes and food, to sing and dance and roam the fields, to ferry the rivers and hunt the beasts of the bush. The shu’halo gave thanks to the elements, to An’she and Mu’sha, and especially to the Earth Mother, mother of all creation.

And for a time, it was good.

But as the elements turned their attention more toward aiding the tauren, the Old Ones trapped beneath the depths watched and waited with a patience as ancient as the world itself. And while Sun and Moon were almost strong enough to defend themselves, the shu’halo were young and vulnerable.

So it was that when next the Earth Mother slept, and Sun and Moon’s power radiated from her slumbering eyes to bring about the change of the seasons, the Old Ones stretched their influence across the land. Slowly at first, the shadows crept through the cracks and crevices of the world, then, growing bold, swept across the plains until their poisonous whispers pricked

the hearts of the tauren. The Old Ones had their own lessons to teach. Both quiet and innumerable were their voices of hatred. Of anger. Of greed. Of sorrow. And of war. A number of the shu'halo were deceived by these whispers. These corrupted shu'halo embraced the words of wickedness and turned on their brethren. They rained down destruction on the land and family they were meant to share. Then there were the ones who lost their light. The darkness invaded their minds and took from them their very selves, until all that remained were broken thoughts and battered beings.

An'she and Mu'sha watched helplessly as the shu'halo were consumed by chaos. They did not know what to do, for their mother had only ever spoken of shadows, not the terrible suffering those powers would bring.

Distraught, Sun and Moon cried out in anguish, waking the Earth Mother so she could see what had been wrought. Instead of water, blood soaked the earth. Fires had turned the forests to ash. The winds howled with vicious storms, and the ground itself shook with a fury that cracked open stone and left the land scarred. All was in disarray, for the shu'halo had turned the elements loose against one another, and for the first time, tauren slew tauren.

"What is this?" the Earth Mother gasped in horror. "What has happened?"

"Something dark," An'she wailed.

"From the deep," Mu'sha lamented.

The Earth Mother, saddened by what had come to pass, wept but a single tear. The world she had taken such care into carving—molding the land to rise as hills and fall as valleys, teaching the elements to tend the forests, leading the shu'halo to seed the plains—was now tainted. The darkness had come, and she was unable to prevent the hold it had taken. The shadow was rooted in the earth, and anything that touched it could eventually fall.

This meant, the Earth Mother realized, that she herself was no longer a safe haven for her children. She was forever connected to these lands, and so she could never leave them. In time, perhaps she too would succumb and be the reason An'she and Mu'sha might as well.

Devastated, and unwilling to take such a risk, she wiped away the lone tear she had before wrenching her eyes free, her fingers digging so deeply that the light of Sun and Moon would never be able to return to her again.

"Forgive me, my children," she cried. "It is the only way."

Flung free from her skull, An'she and Mu'sha tried to console their mother, but it was no use. She lay against the land, frozen in sorrow, now unable to see her children or her world. She did not move. She barely breathed.

"We must stop what did this," An'she said to his sister. "We must make it right."

Mu'sha agreed, and together they set off across the land, determined to hunt down what had corrupted the hearts of the tauren and caused their mother's despair.

As they traveled, word of the Earth Mother's sorrow and the twins' journey to save her from it was carried on the winds, and soon they were met by a party of tauren.

"Be mindful," Mu'sha cautioned her brother as the shu'halo advanced. "We do not know if they have fallen prey to the madness."

But as the tauren drew near, it was clear that though they had been touched by the darkness, they had not been taken by it.

"We can trust them." Mu'sha sighed in relief as she lowered her bow.

A tauren woman at the head of the caravan called out to the twins in greeting.

"Radiant An'she. Luminous Mu'sha. We have heard the despair of the Earth Mother, and it has made our hearts heavy. We come to offer what aid we can."

An'she looked to his sister in surprise. "After what has happened, our mother would not want them to risk so much. And it is our duty to protect them."

The tauren who had spoken for her people called out once more. "Please, hear us. Like you, we are her children. We live on her lands. We hear her whispers on the winds. We call her elements. We feel her light, her love, in you. And we defend our family." The tauren turned as a wagon was drawn forth.

Mu'sha and An'she leaned in to see what the tauren had brought before them, then leaned back in shock.

Laid against a bed of long grass rested a baby. The child glowed blue with life and light, kin to the spark that burned in both Sun and Moon.

"We found the baby alone in the fields," the tauren explained. "We approached a watering hole to rest, but before we could drink, the water

receded to cradle this little one here.”

At that, the baby opened their eyes and began to wail.



The sound bore into the twins and pricked them in the same way as their mother’s sorrow. That is when they recognized the child for who they were: the single tear their mother cried had fallen to the earth, and from it had sprung another life.

Mu’sha took up the child in her arms, and the babe quieted. “They are our mother’s light,” she said to her brother. “They are our family.”

“What shall we call them?” he asked, poking at the newborn curiously.

“Mother will know,” Mu’sha explained. “Let us take them back to her.”

“What of the shadows?”

As the last word was uttered, a stillness fell over the plain, a silence most unnatural.

An'she readied his blades.

Mu'sha drew her bow.

Together, they waited and listened, guarding the tauren and the babe.

And then the shadows struck.

The darkness was like a beast, reaching with its slithering grasp, seeking to tear and sunder. An'she stood strong as the mountain and fought with the ferocity of fire. Mu'sha evaded quick as the wind, flowing in and out of the shadows' reach like water. The tauren called forth the elements to aid in the battle.

Where the light of Sun's blade burned, the shadows retreated. Where Moon's glimmering arrows struck, the whispers evaporated. Together, Sun and Moon began to beat back the darkness that threatened to choke the land, the summoned elements chasing it back toward the recesses of the world.

“We are winning,” An'she cried, raising his swords to the sky.

He did not see the reaching shadow until it was too late. It lashed out, aiming for his heart.

“Brother!” Mu'sha loosed an arrow.

It found its mark, cleaving the darkness in twain, but not before An'she was struck. He fell, grasping at his side, his blood welling between his fingers.

“Like you, we are her children. We live on her lands. We hear her whispers on the winds. We call her elements. We feel her light, her love, in you.”

Mu'sha threw herself down beside him and sought to bind his wound with water and wind, but no matter what she did he continued to bleed.

“The wound is too great,” she said. “I cannot heal it. Maybe our mother can—”

“Do not leave me, sister,” An’she begged.

“I will not.” She stayed at his side, and instead sent her plea on the wind.

When the Earth Mother heard of her children’s peril, she shook herself loose of her grief. Great was her sorrow, but her love for An’she and Mu’sha was deeper still. She could not see the way, but the waters called her name and she followed. The winds pulled at her hands, guided her swiftly to find her Sun and Moon

“An’she!” she called. “Mu’sha!”

“Mother!” Moon reached for the Earth Mother’s hands, pulling her to her side. “An’she is hurt!”

When the Earth Mother knelt beside the twins, her fingers found her son’s face and were wetted by his blood.

“I cannot close the wound,” Mu’sha cried.

“But you are keeping him alive.” The Earth Mother hugged her children, relieved to have found them and surprised to find they were not alone.

Mu’sha presented the babe to her mother. “The shu’halo found them lying on the plain, crying out as you did, birthed from your tear.”

The Earth Mother held the little one in her arms and was pricked by the light of joy once more. “Lo’sho, do not despair.” As she rocked the baby, she asked her children what had become of the darkness.

“We drove it back for now,” An’she answered.

“But the shu’halo are still not safe,” Mu’sha said. “It will return any moment. What are we to do? An’she is wounded, and I cannot fight.” For if she and her healing light strayed too far from her brother, he would surely die.

The Earth Mother turned toward her Sun and Moon. Though she could no longer see, she remembered clearly the vastness of her creation, the wonder and life, and the destruction in the wake of the shadows that had come to devour it.

“You are right,” the Earth Mother finally said, her voice heavy with sadness, for she knew what must be done. “The shu’halo, *my* shu’halo, are free but tainted. They will draw the shadows to them unless I do something to contain them.”

“Mother, no,” the twins protested, but she quieted their storm, as she had with the elements so long ago.

“I must. And you must take to the heavens, forever this time. From there you will see all. From there, your light will chase away whatever traces of shadow I cannot hold. An’she, do not stray from your sister. Stay in her sight always so she may tend your wounds. Mu’sha, follow him closely. You will be his secret strength. Here.” The Earth Mother touched her nose to the child in her arms, then pressed Lo’sho into Mu’sha’s hold. “Take them with you. They are young yet, and untouched by the darkness. Teach them, my children. Teach them my ways. Teach them to care for and protect the shu’halo and this world as I have taught you. And let them know that they have my love. You all do.”

The Earth Mother hugged her children close to her one last time. She kissed their faces as she had when they were younger.

“Take care of each other, and have courage,” she said when they began to weep. “For I am with you, as I am with all my children. Always.”

And so Sun and Moon returned to the heavens, taking with them the new babe.

Her heart heavy, but her conviction firm, the Earth Mother called the elements to her for the final time.

She summoned the rage of the fires. The rush of the winds. The strength of the stones. The push of the waters. They came to her, and with their aid, she stretched herself across the world. She bowed to embrace the lands one last time. She threw her arms wide to lay paths for the shu’halo to follow. She bent her ear to hear the winds as they carried the prayers of her children. And with her chest pressed to the earth, she let the beating of her heart dig deep once more.

Here she rooted herself. Here she would make her stand. Here she would hold the shadows fast. Here she gave all of herself for her creations, never to rise and walk the land again, all to make the world safe for them.

Seeing their mother’s sacrifice, heartbroken Mu’sha bade the breezes lift their mother’s words so the shu’halo could hear. She pulled at the tides and the whispering winds so they would always be able to find her voice and follow it. An’she, with his fierce light, shone across the lands so the way would be clear. Together, they took their eternal post, as young Lo’sho watches and listens to the lessons of their siblings, hearing in them the wisdom of their mother:

“Where there is darkness, you are my light. When the shadows rise, you stem the tide. Be neither troubled nor tired, nor ever afraid, for in each other you shall always find me. You are stronger together, but you are never alone.”

Beneath the now ever-present glow of her Sun and Moons, the Earth Mother’s essence cradles the world close, listening to all that happens. With her body she beat back the darkness. By her love, the world was made safe. While the light may be gone from her eyes, the warmth of her heart is undying.

And though the shu’halo are no longer what they once were, she will never forsake them. For they are her children, and her love and wisdom will always be there to guide them.



ONE SMALL TUSKARR

BY GARTH NIX

ILLUSTRATED BY
JUSTIN GERARD





s that *all* your catch?” asked Onaaka. The young tuskarr carried

a huge emperor salmon himself, the heavy fish balanced across his broad shoulders. It had been expertly speared behind the head. Blood from the wound was trickling along its pectoral fin and dripping inside the collar of Onaaka’s oilskin, spoiling the white fur trim of the coat underneath.

“You go first,” he added. “The catch master will have to call his second to weigh *my* catch.”

Taruka didn’t tell Onaaka he was getting blood on his prized inner coat. She hoped it would spread all down his back and prove impossible to clean. He was always trying to belittle her, perhaps because she was the smallest *kalu’ak*—as the tuskarr called themselves—who had taken on the demanding task of fishing, central to both family and clan life. Onaaka had been born the same day under the same constellation as Taruka, though they could not be less alike. Onaaka was set on making a name for himself, and Taruka was struggling to be seen at all.

She stepped forward and lifted her own string of spotted yellowtail onto the block of ice carved that morning to hold the day’s count. Taruka had caught seven fish, but even all together they would not add up to one-quarter of Onaaka’s huge salmon.

Kattik Sharktasted—who had retired from daily fishing when he lost an eye, one hand, and a leg to a shark—grunted and nodded, his tusks very yellow in the afternoon sun. Taruka wished he'd clean them, like everyone else did. They were so yellow she couldn't even see the deeply etched clan and family symbols.

“One knot,” repeated Kattik. “Maybe one day you will get more. But not today.”

The catch master lifted the string of fish to expertly assess the total weight and laid it back down on the ice before selecting the cord in Taruka's colors—blue, blue, green, red, yellow—from the three dozen on his counting staff, one for each of the active fishers in the clan. He tied a single knot in the bright, multicolored cord, a record of her day's catch, adding to the three that were already there. Most of the other cords had many more knots.

“One knot?” asked Taruka. She tried not to show her disappointment. The tuskarr shared food equally, but a catch above the basic requirements earned knots, which could be traded within the clan for luxuries and new tools or weapons, or exchanged for coins if they needed to trade beyond their own small group of families. She was aiming to earn five knots, which would be enough to get a bolt of kite silk for her sister, Unka, from the old hoarder, Warrak. Unka was an energetic child and desperate to repair and fly Taruka's old kite.

“One knot,” confirmed Kattik. “Your fish are small, and three have early gill rot. They will only be good for soup.”

Taruka stared at him. He stared back with his left eye, dark, deep-set, and unblinking. His right eye was a bare red socket of scar tissue. Both eyes were largely hidden under massive eyebrows that were twice as bushy and dense as anyone else's. Everything about Kattik was huge. Eyebrows, moustache, tusks ... and a sense of his own importance.

“Show me the gill rot,” she said, pointing to the fish, trying not to reveal that she was standing on the tips of her toes. They were still silver, out of the water for less than half an hour. She had trailed them in her net behind the

boat. Their eyes were clear, gills red. There was no sign of the dull, fibrous growths that indicated gill rot.

“One knot,” repeated Kattik. “Maybe one day you will get more. But not today.”

His tone suggested he didn’t believe that day would ever come, and he gestured for her to make way for Onaaka.

Taruka seethed, but there was nothing she could do. She picked up her fish and carried them to another massive block of ice a dozen paces away, where Larati was busy filleting fish, throwing the finished cuts back to her assistants, who were packing them between layers of ice in sealskin baskets. The clan was getting ready to travel to Kamagua, a *kalu’ak* town and major stopping point in their nomadic peregrinations. Most of the mothers, adolescents, and children were to go across the ice and needed lots of food laid down in the seal-drawn sleds, in case of delay caused by bad weather or some other incident. The heartier tuskarr fishers were taking their boats—a shorter passage that should only take a few days, and they could catch their own food on the way.

“Kattik says three have early gill rot and cannot be eaten,” grumbled Taruka.

Larati paused from her expert beheading, gutting, and filleting and stabbed her knifepoint into the ice butcher’s block, sending a spray of small chips into the air.

“Kattik is like the old stones,” chuckled Larati. “Unchanging. He dislikes anything new or young. You are both. Why not butcher with me? Better company and no splinters to be had!”

“He counted this as only one knot,” said Taruka. “One knot!”

“Kattik stinks worse than frozen seal dung thawed in spring,” said Larati, loud enough for Kattik to hear. Doubtless he would return the insult later; this was their usual practice. More softly she added, “But ... no other catch master would give more. Some might not even give one knot.”



Taruka gave a tuskarr sigh—a long, whistling note through pursed lips, accompanied by a slump of her shoulders. She adjusted her rolled-up fishing net as it threatened to slide down to her elbow.

“I know,” she said. “I must catch more fish. Bigger fish.”

Larati nodded without conviction and took up her knife again, bringing the sharpened whalebone down in a decapitating blow on the fish before her. She used the flat of the blade to sweep the head into a basket by her knee and swung back to slit open the fish’s belly.

Taruka trudged away, knowing that even her friend Larati didn’t believe she could catch more and bigger fish. Everything was against her. She was shorter and slighter than most tuskarr. Unlike the other fishers, she could not

row one of the bigger boats. Her craft was much smaller than most of the clan's vessels, and to make up for her lack of rowing power, she sailed most of the time, which had unique advantages and disadvantages the others did not share.

Even worse, she had not been fully taught to fish by her father, as the others had been. Her father had died when she had just begun to go to sea to start learning with him. He had simply not returned from fishing one afternoon. Almost a week later, the mast from his boat washed ashore, the sails and rigging stripped from it and the ends splintered. Years later, Taruka had shortened the mast and stepped it in her own tiny boat. It was one of only two things she had left from her father, along with the memory burned in her mind of that one day she had, fishing with him. He had given her a line and hook, but she hadn't caught anything and after a whole morning wanted to try a net or a spear, even though she was too small to lift either one.

"Taruka. It is not hook, net, or spear that makes a true fisher. It is the patience to use them well."

An hour later she caught a huge sunfish and was almost dragged out of the boat, her laughing father pulling both her and the fish in at the same time.

But the next day Taruka had been invited to go kite-flying, and he had gone alone, never to return. She had taught herself to fish, watching the others, listening to their talk, and going out every day to learn through trial and error—a great deal of error when she first started. None of the other tuskarr would tell her about the currents or the places the fish gathered, claiming the teaching could *only* take place between a fisher parent and child. A few gave her hints from time to time and offered general but distant encouragement.

"I will catch big fish," Taruka muttered to herself. "I will."

She was repeating this litany as she kicked through the slushy snow to the camp, which lay in the sheltered vale some distance from the landing point, when she heard footsteps behind her. Thinking it was Onaaka coming to brag about his catch even more, she sped up, putting her head down and lifting her feet higher. Tuskarr were not built to run, but this was one thing where her lighter build helped.

"Ho! Youngling, wait for me!"

It wasn't Onaaka. Taruka stopped and turned around, recognizing the scratchy voice of Harooka. The older tuskarr had nearly drowned once, and her voice had been permanently affected. Harooka was one of the oldest fishers.

"Wait!" commanded Harooka, puffing up. She had dyed her moustache blue, and her tusks were engraved with symbols Taruka didn't know, quite different from the usual family and clan ideograms everyone else had. Marks granted for deeds of great distinction. Taruka had long wanted to ask exactly what they meant, but she didn't dare. Harooka never talked about the symbols—and she was deadly with both a spear and her bad temper. "Have any of the others warned you about Lyquokk Strait?"

"No," said Taruka.

Harooka grunted angrily, but the anger was not directed toward the younger tuskarr. She sank heavily on one knee, drew her filleting knife—a slender length of carefully sharpened whale tooth—and swept aside a layer of snow to scratch out a rough map in the ice beneath. The ivory point cut the shape of the coast from the current camp to Kamagua, and a large island to the southwest. Replacing the knife, Harooka drew with her gloved finger a line that went out from the shore and around the island, rejoining the mainland well to the north.

"No one has told you to sail the longer way? Around Praak Island, like this?" she asked. "You know you must not cut through Lyquokk Strait?"

"No," replied Taruka. "No one told me. Why?"

"There is death there," said Harooka. "Avoid it."

She got up, huffing so much her moustache blew up almost to her eyes, clapped Taruka on the shoulder, and strode back down the slope toward the landing place.

Taruka watched her and wondered about the warning. Was it honest advice? Or had the others sent Harooka because she was the one Taruka was most likely to believe? The more she thought about it, the more suspicious she became. It was likely the best fishing was in Lyquokk Strait, and the others would arrive in Kamagua with their boats full to the gunwales with fresh fish, and at least a day earlier than her as well. They didn't want competition, even from one small tuskarr.

"I'll show them," whispered Taruka. "I will catch more fish. Bigger fish than anyone."

Dinner with Taruka's mother and sister was, as had happened all too often recently, not a happy occasion. Unka sulked because she was disappointed not to get the kite silk, and Makusha hardly ate before she resumed expertly embroidering an undershirt, leaning close to make best use of the light from the whale-oil lamp. Though she didn't say anything, she didn't have to—her body language was clear. It took longer to earn knots from doing fine embroidery. In a week or so, the undershirt would be finished, and it would fetch enough to get Unka the kite silk. Makusha had taught Taruka to sew, and though she was not as skilled as her mother, the two of them working together could finish an undershirt every two or three days.

It was much more certain than fishing, if less respected among the clan.

"I will catch many fish on the way to Kamagua," announced Taruka, answering her mother's unspoken criticism. "You will get your kite silk, Unka, and Mother will have the tusk polish she likes."

Unka covered her head with her sleeping furs and pretended to be asleep. Makusha emitted a noise that could be taken as either encouragement or doubt, more likely the latter, and continued sewing. Taruka snorted, a very clear expression of discontent, and left the tent.

Outside, the sky had turned purple and dull orange. It never got properly dark this far north. A few brightly colored kites were swooping overhead, flown by some of the older children who were not exhausted by the day's work.

Taruka went to the sled and checked the loading. Everything was in its proper place; the harness was ready to be hitched to a seal or another sled. The clan had only six draft seals, so each would pull three or four sleds.

One package on the sled attracted her particular attention, as it always did, lying in pride of place atop the load. A scabbard longer than she was tall, made of the best sealskin, decorated with buttons carved from whalebone. It contained the only other possession her father had left the family, apart from the mast the sea had returned. His cherished spear, which he had almost never used. The spear was very old and very special. Taruka remembered him telling her that, though it was many years ago now and she had been younger than Unka.

He had said, "If I need the spear, Oacha'noa will tell me so."

“Yes,” said a voice. It sounded close to Taruka’s ear, but also strangely distant at the same time. The voice made her moustache hairs stand up and her tusks ache, and she looked wildly about her for whoever could possibly be talking and could cause such an effect.

But there was no one. Apart from the kite-fliers farther up the vale, the camp was quiet. Everyone was eating their dinner or had already gone to sleep.

Did I imagine the voice? Taruka asked herself. But she was sure she had heard it, and it had seemed to answer a question—a question she had not asked. Or had she? It had come at the exact moment she remembered her father talking about the spear, and Oacha’noa, the goddess of wisdom ...

A breeze suddenly roared around the sled, picking up ice crystals in a miniature whirlwind before depositing them at Taruka’s fur-wrapped feet. Instinctively, from her own kite-flying days, she looked at the kites. A gust like that could easily break a string ... but the kites sailed peacefully overhead. There had been no gust of wind up there.

She looked down. The ice crystals had made a pattern there, a rough symbol in the shape of a kraken.

The mark of Oacha’noa!

“I am to take the spear?” asked Taruka in a very small voice. She felt like she was a babe again, asking for a sweetcake.

The wind came howling back, scattering the shards of ice to destroy the pattern it had made, and then as quickly as it came, it stopped. The air was still again.

Taruka reached up and took down the scabbarded spear.



Taruka left very early the next morning. Makusha and Unka were still snoring away in the tent, tightly wrapped in their sleeping furs. Outside, no one else was stirring. Though dawn did not so much break as gradually brighten, it was light enough to see, light enough for Taruka to set forth.

It was also cold, but not especially so for a tuskarr in furs and oilskins. By the time she got down to the landing place, Taruka was even hot, so she

unlaced her gloves and boots a little to let some air in. She had left her boat ready the day before, as always, but still had to stow her net and the spear. She had not taken the weapon from its scabbard; it did not seem right to do so. It was not yet time. She tied it in place next to her very ordinary spear, alongside the gunwale on the port side.

It looked to be a good sailing day. A light breeze was already blowing from the southeast, and it would probably strengthen. Taruka shoved off from the jetty and rowed her boat out between the larger vessels anchored close by. Once clear of them, she raised headsail and mainsail, trimmed them to gain the best point of sailing, and steered for the north. She glanced behind her once as she settled by the tiller. A couple of the other tuskarr were preparing their boats, one of them Onaaka. He shouted something after her, but the wind blew his words away.

She hugged the coast going north, keeping it in sight, instinctively noting her speed by observing the fragments of ice that floated past. There was no danger of icebergs yet. That would come in spring, when the frozen sea to the north broke up and the ice floated south.

The southeast corner of Praak Island came into distant view before noon, and her current course would take her closer to it than the mainland. Taruka hesitated for several minutes before going about on the opposite tack to strike northeast, steering directly into Lyquokk Strait.

All the time, she was watching for signs of fish. A disturbance of the surface like unseen rain falling, or silver shapes jumping, or a gathering of seabirds. But the sea gave no such indications; there was only the long, regular swell, with the tops of the waves chopped up a little by the wind. The breeze had strengthened, enough to send her boat along with every stay humming, the sails taut. If it blew harder, she would have to take in a reef or even lower a sail, but for the moment it was a very fair wind for Kamagua.

An hour later, as Taruka gauged she must be halfway up the strait, the wind suddenly increased though there were no clouds, and she had not seen the characteristic movement on the water. Taruka lowered and furled the main, half-thrilled at the speed she was making, half-worried the wind had increased without warning.

There were still no signs of any fish. Taruka peered about her, ignoring the cold spray flying into her face, from the bow piercing the wave tops. In

answer to the wind, the sea was becoming rougher, the swell no longer so regular and even.

She saw something off to port, wiped her eyes with the back of a glove, and looked again. There was a shadow under the water, coming toward her. A huge shadow, at least six times longer and three times as wide as her boat. It moved as swiftly as her wind-driven craft, though it was fully submerged.

In that instant, Taruka knew Harooka's warning had been entirely honest. But she had no time to regret her ill-founded suspicion. The shadow moved under her boat. Taruka's hands were already in motion, reaching across to untie the spears. She grabbed the scabbard and ripped it open, sending buttons flying. Her father's spear was halfway out when the boat shuddered violently and came to a full stop, as if it had hit a rock. Taruka was hurled forward, landing with a terrible jolt on the bottom boards before the mast.

The boat lurched again and lifted up, seawater pouring from its sides. At first it was almost level; then the stern began to sink and the bow to rise. Taruka gripped the mast with her left hand and pulled herself up, somehow managing to get the spear free and ready in her right hand. Unlike most tuskarr weapons, the spearhead was not made of sharpened bone, but black volcanic glass.

The boat lifted higher and higher, up into the air. Timbers groaned and screeched as the boat started to slide stern-first toward the sea behind. Taruka looked over the side. The giant sea creature had risen up underneath, and now the boat was sliding down its *scaly* hide. Whatever the creature was, it wasn't a whale. Not with those strangely shimmering blue-black scales instead of blubber.

The beast lifted its head higher, and the boat began to slide faster backward. Taruka lifted the spear high, leaned over the side, and drove it into the strange scales below with all her might.

The spear rebounded with a screech as if she'd struck at stone, the shock reverberating through her wrists and elbows. The scales were armor. Even her father's fabled spear could not penetrate it.

The boat's stern hit the sea, and it lurched sideways. Taruka jumped clear and slid downward too, her feet scrabbling for purchase. Somehow her free hand found a gap between two scales, and she forced her fingers in and hung there, but before she could think of what to do the great beast raised its tail, which was long, tapered, and finned like an eel's. She lost her grip, plunged

forward, and went slipping down the creature's back the other way, toward its head.

Heavy rain drenched her, or what seemed like rain till she saw it came from the huge plume of spray jetting from the creature's blowhole. This was in the center of its head like a whale's spout, but unlike a whale's it stuck out like a carbuncle, a volcano-shaped excrescence of the same shimmering blue-black armored scales. Its head was framed by fins that fanned out, barbs protruding from the ends.



The creature disappeared beneath the surface, its dive already in motion, the

massive body continuing for a little while longer, not knowing it was dead.

The creature's eyes were higher on the head than a whale's would be too, and facing forward. Almost like a stargazer, a manta the tuskarr occasionally caught on a deep line. But the eyes were not like any fish or whale Taruka had ever seen. They more closely resembled a seagull's eyes, made huge, red-rimmed and yellow, but even then there was a difference, because the pupils were vertical bars of hard darkness, not round and soft at all.

When she saw the eyes, Taruka stopped trying to arrest her slide. She rolled over on her stomach, locked the spear under her elbow, and pushed with her feet, changing direction so she slid straight toward the eye she was already most in line with. The left eye.

The blowhole plume subsided, and the strange rain ceased. Taruka screamed in frustration as the creature raised its head again and her forward motion slowed. She pushed frantically with her feet and clawed at the scales ahead with her free hand, knowing it was useless. Without a long slide she would never—

Suddenly the beast began to dive, its head down and tail up. Taruka was flung forward again. As the sea rushed up to swallow her, for reasons she couldn't place, her father's wisdom echoed in her mind.

"It is not hook, net, or spear that makes a true fisher. It is the patience to use them well."

She waited until the second before she hit the waves and lost all momentum. Then, with her fast-sliding weight behind it, her father's spear struck true, piercing the creature's eye, and sank in all the way to where she gripped the haft.

Blood erupted from the wound like a geyser even as a wave swept Taruka away. She lost her hold on the spear, which was anchored in the monster, sunk deep into its brain. The creature disappeared beneath the surface, its dive already in motion, the massive body continuing for a little while longer, not knowing it was dead.

Taruka went under too, sucked down in the backwash, but she was a tuskarr. Water so cold it would kill most of the other denizens of Azeroth in

minutes was survivable for her. The *kalu'ak* did not drown easily. She kicked toward the surface, at the same time struggling out of her oilskin coat.

She emerged on the crest of a wave, spitting seawater and gulping air, before drawing up her legs to remove her boots. Then she trod water for a while and looked around.

Sturdy as her tuskarr body was, Taruka knew she would almost certainly die of exhaustion, exposure, or both. But there might be a chance she could delay her inevitable end. If she could see the shore, she might be able to swim to it. Or maybe the oars from her boat had floated free. She could rest on them and maybe—

Her boat. Taruka blinked and wiped her eyebrows, which were sodden and dripping saltwater into her eyes. She had to wait till she rose up on the crest of the next wave to confirm what she thought she'd seen, but there it was.

Her boat hadn't sunk. It had capsized. The hull was riding low with the keel barely an arm span above the sea, with the mast snapped off and floating next to it, but her boat was still afloat.

She swam to the craft and climbed, shivering, onto the upturned hull. It felt colder in the wind, but she knew it was better to be out of the water. The sun was shining, which would help enormously, and the wind had lessened.

Taruka took stock of the situation. She had her inner furs on, which would grow warmer as they dried. Unless the swell increased and waves broke over the hull, or the boat sank lower, the furs would dry over the next few hours. She had her filleting knife and a few strips of cured fish. The mast floating nearby had the furled mainsail attached—the cloth might be useful.

But with all that, she still could not right the boat by herself. All she could do was float here and hope to be rescued. Or if the boat somehow drifted close enough, she could swim to the barren shore, which would not be much better.

Something moved in the corner of her eye, a shadow under the surface. Taruka flinched, unable to help herself. Was the creature only blinded and now coming back for its revenge? She clutched her knife, knowing it would be useless, and steeled herself for what was to come.

The shadow rose, and then, with an anticlimactic sound like a big stone thrown into a pool, the creature bobbed to the surface. Taruka stared at it,

waiting for the tail to suddenly whip up, the elongated, toothy jaws she had refused to look at before to yawn wide, the beast turning to engulf her, boat and all.

But at the same time, she knew a floating dead fish when she saw one. It simply took several seconds for this to break through the panic in her mind that told her she really was going to die this time.

A minute or two later, she was sure the creature was dead. She took a deep if somewhat shaky breath and considered the floating creature. It rode high in the water, much higher than any normal dead fish would float. *It must have a lot of air inside it*, she thought. This led to other thoughts.

Perhaps there was a chance ...

Taruka slid over the side and dived under her boat, returning a minute or two later with one of the oars, which had luckily not floated free. Sitting astride the keel, she began to paddle the boat toward the massive corpse. Reaching it, she tied her boat off at the tail and climbed onto the monster. Now that it was floating level, it was easy to walk all the way up to the blowhole and take a look inside. From there she edged forward and looked down at the long, protruding upper jaw. It was rather like a ship's bowsprit, Taruka thought.

She went back to her boat, cut the mast free from various tangled lines, and dragged it up onto the monster's back. The mast that had survived two ill-fated voyages was now to be put in service again, in a new craft.

Taruka stepped the mast in the blowhole. It didn't fit all that well, but she chocked it with bits of splintered timber. The forestay she fastened to the tip of the outthrust jaw. This took a little swimming, but she somehow felt the cold less now that she had a plan and could leave her furs to stay dry up high by the blowhole. More swimming was required to wind the backstay around the eel-like tail. The butt of her father's spear, lodged too deeply for her to pull out, made an admirable peg for one of the shrouds, and she found that loose scales could be pried up to serve as cleats for the others.

It was by no means a perfect rigging, but when Taruka hoisted the mainsail, her new vessel moved with the wind behind it, albeit slowly. She found it could be very roughly steered by moving her old upturned boat from one side of the tail to the other and by careful trimming of the sail.

Better still, she salvaged her net from the old boat, and with scavengers trailing the dead beast and predators targeting the scavengers, she caught

many fish. Enough to feed her, and she drank their blood so that the three-day voyage northward did not end with her starved and thirsty and beaten down.

It ended in triumph, even if she did have to be towed the last few hundred yards into Kamagua Harbor, the wind having shifted enough to make the matter tedious. Everyone wanted to help, so her strange vessel that was also her catch was towed by boats from many different clans and by the kayaks of the children. Scores of kites were flown from the shore overhead, to indicate to those far away that something great and wonderful was taking place.

Onaaka was one of the people who wanted to help with the tow. Taruka allowed this and did not boast to him about her catch. He watched very quietly from his boat, with an expression on his face she'd never seen before. Then, just loud enough for her to hear, Onaaka said, "That is a good ... a very good catch."

The catch masters of all the clans who had gathered in Kamagua were waiting along the jetty. Behind them were dozens and dozens of tuskarr, all come to see a fable come to life. Taruka saw Makusha and Unka and waved. *Everyone* waved back.

Taruka lifted a foot onto the blowhole rim and climbed up, holding the mast. She looked down at the catch masters, singling out Kattik. He looked smaller somehow.

"So, Kattik!" proclaimed Taruka Beastkiller, as she was already being called. "I do not think whatever this is has gills or gill rot. How many knots for my catch?"





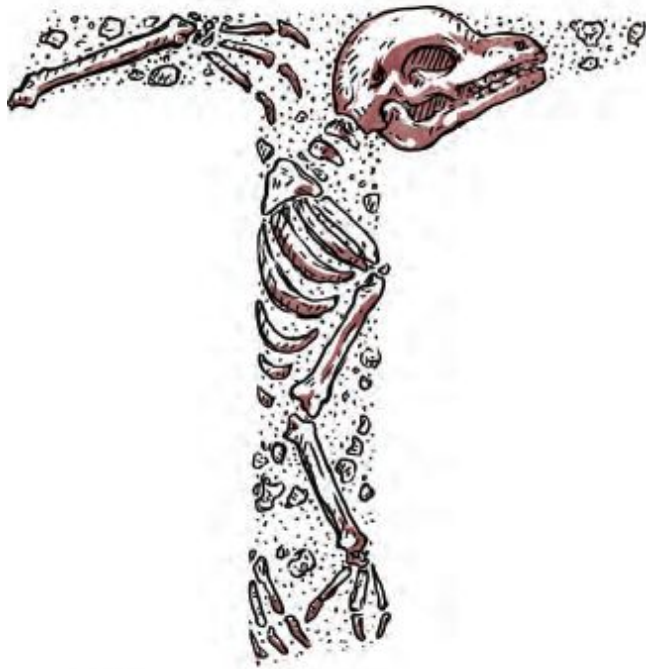
LAY DOWN MY BONES

BY ALYSSA WONG

ILLUSTRATED BY
LINDSEY BURCAR







he night I stole the Wailing Bone, I

waited until the rest of the caravan was asleep, lying in my bedroll and pretending not to hear the steady *drip, drip, drip* of water on the wagon canvas. My parents snored at one end of the wagon, their whiskers fluttering with every breath. They slept with their backs turned to each other, their large, soft tails curled angrily away, pulled tight against their bodies. They'd fought again, just like they had every night for the past few weeks.

I slid free of my blanket and crept past my pile of sleeping younger siblings, careful not to wake them. There were five of them, all still kits, with giant paws and oversize, pointed ears. Looking at them made my heart hurt. As the eldest, just a year shy of adulthood, I spent much of my time watching over them. Even now, in the dark, they looked exhausted. No one had slept well in ages, not with the constant sound of dripping water in our ears.

When I parted the linen flaps and gazed up at the sky, it was clear and bright with stars. The desert sand beneath the wagon was dry.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My ears twitched.

The wet, persistent sound followed me to Elder Kulen's wagon, which rested at the head of the caravan. It was easy to quietly undo one of the heavy side flaps, now more patchwork than hide, and even easier to slip inside. As Elder Kulen shifted listlessly in her sleep, I padded toward the carved wooden trunk along the far wall. Most objects in the caravan had multiple functions, shifting easily between uses. This trunk was a rare exception, crafted for only one purpose. Gently, slowly, I lifted the lid.

There, nestled in a bed of gauzy fabric, lay the Wailing Bone. Our caravan's only heirloom, older than the oldest wagon. It was the length of my forearm, as thick around as my wrist. Its surface was carved with an ancient poem, written in a script that few vulpera could read but all could recite by heart:

*Wander, roam; bring me home,
Down paths at my behest;
Among the stones, lay down my bones,
So I, at last, may rest.*

As I looked at the Wailing Bone, my stomach twisted. Not even the dark could hide the fact that the Wailing Bone had been snapped in half. The two halves had been pushed together, but there was an ugly, jagged crack between them.

Elder Kulen snorted, and I froze, my paws hovering over the wooden chest. But she rolled over, lightly snoring, and I was able to breathe again. I leaned in and, after a moment's hesitation, touched the bone.

The gentle, persistent dripping was gone, and suddenly I was being sucked under a river's surface, the breath ripped from my lungs. My head was filled with the roar of rushing water. My throat closed up. I fought to breathe, choking on nothing. I felt as though clawed hands gripped my shoulders from behind, and a phantom voice snarled in my ear:

NO REST. NEVER REST.

I managed to yank my paw away. The moment I did, the chilling grasp vanished, and the roaring sound was gone. In its place was the soft *drip, drip, drip* that had followed the caravan for the past month. I shuddered. Clearly, handling the bone was a bad idea. But tonight was already full of bad ideas. What was one more?

I carefully avoided touching the Wailing Bone again as I rolled its halves up in their gauzy cloth. I shoved the parcel down my shirt and slid back out of the wagon. From there, I snuck a riding hyena—my hyena, Isha—and her tack out of the dens, and together we loped across the sands, out into the wilderness of Vol’dun.

The dripping sound continued to echo in my ears, even as the caravan grew small in the distance. Beneath my shirt, the Wailing Bone knocked against my ribs like a warning.



No one believed in the Wailing Bone, not really. It was a silly tale told to kits, the kind of tradition that adults played along with to make the caravan elders feel important.

Elder Rivu was the first to tell me the story of the Wailing Bone, back when I was little. “The first vulpera was born from the desert’s magic,” he said, crouched before the campfire with all the young ones gathered close. Rivu’s story times were a highlight of a childhood spent on the road. Sometimes he would even do shadow puppets with his claws. “Our people roam all our lives, but when we die, the desert calls our bodies back to where we began. To help our spirits find the end of their journey beyond the veil, we follow the Wailing Bone.”

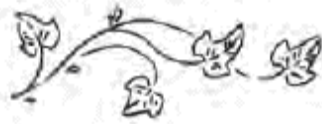
“Follow it where?” my favorite cousin, Siy, piped up. He was two years older than me, already starting to grow gangly, while I remained short as a barrel cactus. We would wrestle and laugh and play as often as we could. Siy was clever and mischievous in a way that I aspired to be, and I was glued to his side like a shadow.



Rivu smiled kindly. He had led the caravan for decades, guiding us safely through the Vol'dun desert. "We go wherever the Wailing Bone guides us, Siy. Sometimes the journey takes a day. Sometimes it might take weeks. The journey is hard and takes great patience, but when the Wailing Bone begins to Afe cry, we know we've found our loved one's final resting place. Someday, it will be your turn to hold the Wailing Bone and send my spirit home."

"What if the bone doesn't cry?" I asked quietly. Both Rivu and Siy glanced at me. I didn't speak up often, but this time I raised my voice. "Do we have to wander forever?"

"I hope not, Hava," Rivu replied, amused. The campfire cast rippling light across the sand, reflecting in his bright eyes. "Forever is a very long time."



“You’re late,” Siy hissed. My cousin waited for me at the edge of the canyon, gripping the reins of his hyena. His paranoid gaze darted past me as if he expected to see the rest of our caravan hot on my heels. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his golden fur was ragged. Siy was usually vain about his fur, but he looked like he’d gone tracking prey across the dunes for a week and had forgotten to bring a comb.

To be fair, I knew I didn’t look much better. Lack of sleep made me feel slow and stupid. “If you’re so pressed for time, maybe *you* should have stolen the Wailing Bone,” I snapped, hopping off Isha’s back. The sand underfoot was cool. At night, the desert heat gave way to cold stone and dry winds. It was the best time to travel when speed mattered more than safety.

Siy approached. “Did you get it?” he asked in a low voice.

I pulled out the cloth-wrapped package. Siy seized the Wailing Bone and began to tear at the cloth. “Siy, wait,” I said, trying to grab his arm, but he shook me off. “Siy! Don’t touch it! It’s—”

The moment Siy grabbed the Wailing Bone, his eyes flew open wide. A strangled scream left his mouth, but it sounded wrong: garbled, like he was howling underwater. His body froze up, claws curved in a rictus around the bone. I tried to shake him, but he didn’t move.

There was no time to think. I slammed into Siy with my shoulder, knocking us both to the sand. The Wailing Bone flew past us, its two broken ends bouncing in opposite directions.

**“The journey is hard and tafees great
patience, but when the Wailing Bone
begins to cry, we know we’ve found our
loved one’s final resting place.”**

Siy gasped for breath, rolling over on his stomach. He struggled to his hands and knees and vomited a torrent of water onto the ground. It was more

water than I'd ever seen Siy drink in one sitting, or even a day. It poured out of him like a river, studded with little pebbles and silt. Finally, with one last heave, the water ran dry. There were a handful of tiny silver fish, minnows, flopping in the mud between his front paws.

Siy was still choking. There was something hanging from his mouth, limp and corded. I grasped it and pulled, and length after length of slimy fibers emerged from his throat. It was river grass, enough to circle my waist several times over. Fresh and wet, still vibrant green, ending in stringy, spidery roots. Siy looked at me with terror in his eyes.

"I told you not to touch it," I said shakily. I got to my feet and gathered the pieces of the Wailing Bone, trying to ignore the strange, awful sound of dripping water all around me, a sound with no source. The sound that had followed Siy and me home three weeks ago and never left.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"We have to make the dripping stop tonight," Siy said. His voice was hoarse. He spat on the ground, and another pebble clattered out to join the others. "I can't keep living like this, Hava. It's going to kill me. I can barely sleep, and when I do, I have nightmares."

I did too. I heard that dripping sound all hours of the day and night, wearing away at my nerves like a stream carving an indent in a cliff. I even heard it in my sleep. When I dreamed, I dreamed of water, rising up around my ears, pouring down my throat until I choked and drowned. I dreamed of Elder Rivu, his corpse soft and river-rotted, howling my name as he chased me through the desert. In those dreams, Siy ran at my side until his paws bled, gasping for air. Every morning, I woke more exhausted than the day before.

As much as I hated to admit it, Siy was right. I used my claws to cut the soft, gauzy cloth in two strips. I wrapped one fragment of the Wailing Bone in it, covering the jagged part and creating a makeshift handle. I held it out to Siy, who stared at it like I was handing him a live snake.

To be fair, this was worse.

"Take it," I said impatiently. He wrapped his fingers tentatively around the bone encased in the thinnest armor in the desert—we both held our breath.

Slowly, Siy shook his head. Nothing. No water, no drowning, no voices.

The tightness in my chest loosened just a bit. I quickly wrapped the other half of the Wailing Bone, holding it tightly. Its jagged, broken edge bit into my palm through the fabric.

Together, Siy and I turned to face the canyon up ahead. It cut a giant gash into the desert, an open wound in the face of the rock. Somewhere in there, a river wound through the rocks like the crooked tail of a scorpion, glistening beneath the moon, still swollen from the spring rains.

We left the hyenas behind and began our descent, picking a path down to the canyon's throat. As Siy followed me, the Wailing Bone in my hand began to shiver.



Elder Rivu had been right about one thing. When he'd passed away, the caravan had entrusted Siy and me with the Wailing Bone. Since Rivu had no kin and we were on the cusp of adulthood, we had been tasked with carrying the bone at the head of the caravan. We perched on the driver's seat of Rivu's wagon and traded off Wailing Bone duty, pointing it out toward the desert and slowly moving it back and forth, ears cocked for the slightest hint of a sound.



At first, it was exciting. It was our first time seeing the Wailing Bone outside its shroud, and the responsibility made me feel important. But no matter where or how far our caravan roamed, the bone refused to cry. Everyone was exhausted and impatient, including Siy and me, our arms achy from holding them outstretched for weeks. Elder Rivu's body lay behind us in his wagon, wrapped in an oiled canvas sheet with desert flowers and

herbs, slowly decomposing in the blistering heat. The smell was awful, try as the plants might to dispel it.

When a flash flood struck, sweeping through the dry, cracked land, I half hoped it would sweep Rivu's wagon away too. No such luck; our wagons were sturdy and cunningly made, able to withstand the torrent of water. I'd never resented them more.

When I voiced my complaints to Siy, he narrowed his eyes in consideration. "There's a canyon not far from here," he said. "The riverbed's usually dry, but the flash flood will have filled it up. If we put Rivu's body in the river, the current will do our job for us. It'll probably carry him to his final resting place, and no one will be the wiser."

I glanced back at the closed wagon flap, dread and hope building in my chest. "The bone will know."

"Will it?" Siy countered. "It's a *bone*. We don't even know if it works." I must not have looked convinced, because he drew himself up, his tufted ears pointed forward. His fluffy tail flicked arrogantly behind him. "Look, Hava. Even if the river can't take him to the right spot, it'll still carry his body downstream every rain. It'll trick the Wailing Bone into thinking he's still wandering with the caravan, searching for his resting place. Trust me, it's brilliant."

Of course I trusted him. Clever Siy was always right, even when he wasn't. I had my doubts about his plan, but I was so tired of wandering the desert, and I just wanted to be done. I'd spent my whole life following Siy, so I followed him to the canyon that night with Elder Rivu's body strapped to my saddle. Only the stars witnessed us haul him to the river's edge and throw him over.

But the moment Elder Rivu's body hit the water, the Wailing Bone screamed. This was no low, wrenching sob; it was a horrible, piercing sound that tore through me, standing my fur on end. Siy and I turned just in time to see the Wailing Bone crack in half. Our caravan's precious heirloom lay in two pieces on the riverbank, its halves aimed at us like accusatory fingers.

The rest of that night was a blur. I remember scrambling back to the caravan, telling my parents that we'd followed the Wailing Bone to Elder Rivu's resting place on our own, that we'd buried him out among the bluffs. Siy made a big show of explaining how we'd done it for the good of our kin, seeing how tired they all were from our long journey. I remember wrapping

the broken Wailing Bone up tightly and stuffing it back into its trunk. The rest of the caravan sighed with relief, and we all laid down for a well-deserved rest. But the quiet comfort of night would be lost to us when the slow, malevolent sound of dripping water began. No one could find its source or make it stop.

Only Siy and I knew that our crime had followed us home.



Tonight, things would be different. Tonight, we were going to fix everything.

I stared at the back of Siy's head as we followed the familiar path into the canyon. I was so tired that it was hard to focus; I gritted my teeth and kept my eyes on my cousin.

The canyon's red sandstone walls rose up around us as we approached the river's edge. Another flash flood had washed through the canyon recently, and the water level was still high. I lifted the tip of my Wailing Bone fragment and pointed it at the water. "Did you feel that, Siy?"

He glanced at me, one ear swiveling back. "What?"

"The bone hummed when we got near the water." I stepped closer to the river, just short of the shoreline. Even from here, the current looked deadly fast. Was it fast enough to rip an abandoned body from the riverbed and wash it downstream? "Come here and listen."

Siy came to join me, waving his piece of the Wailing Bone slowly over the river like a dowsing rod. "I don't hear anything," he said, gazing out toward the rocks on the other side. "I don't think my half of the Wailing Bone is making any noise."

Of course it wasn't. Neither was mine. I gripped my side of the Wailing Bone with both paws and stepped up behind him, out of his line of sight. Then I swung as hard as I could.

The Wailing Bone smashed into Siy's head with an ugly *crunch*. He crumpled to the ground, gasping. I stood over my cousin, gazing down at his face. My closest friend. The one who had come up with the plan to throw Elder Rivu in the river and, in doing so, had cursed us all.

"Hava," Siy gasped.

“Don’t,” I said shakily. I raised the bone and slammed it down again. Siy was bigger than me, but by the time I was done, he couldn’t move. He couldn’t even fight as I grabbed him under the arms and dragged him into the river.

He did fight me when I pushed him beneath the surface, his bloodied claws scrabbling at my wrists. But I pressed the Wailing Bone against his throat and shoved him deeper into the water. My arms burned and tears poured down my face, but I held on. It felt like forever until the frantic bubbles stopped and Siy went quiet.

When I let go, Siy’s body should have floated. Instead, it sank quietly into the water, his blank eyes staring up at me until they disappeared into the depths. I stood panting, waist-deep in the river, trying not to cry or throw up. I held both ends of the quiet Wailing Bone, one in each hand. For the first time in ages, I didn’t hear the dripping sound—and even more powerful than the guilt and horror in my heart was my utter sense of relief.

“There!” I screamed. “Are you satisfied? *Are you satisfied?* It was all his idea! Take him and leave us alone!”

For a moment, there was silence.

And then the Wailing Bone *laughed*.

Claws grabbed my ankles and yanked me off my feet. I plunged beneath the surface of the water, flailing; something else caught my wrist, and a pale, wizened face pushed into my vision. Elder Rivu, bloated from three weeks underwater, bared his teeth at me. I tried to scream, but all I got was a mouthful of water.

The halves of the Wailing Bone burned in my paws. *For generations, your caravan has given themselves to me.* I could hear its voice in my head, clear as the air after a rainstorm. It was the same one I’d heard when I’d lifted it from the trunk, mere hours and yet a lifetime ago. *They performed their duty—I know how burdensome it is. In return, I granted their spirits peace. I found their journeys’ end. Thousands of vulpera followed my cries, but you abandoned your elder and left him in this river, where his body can never know rest, fighting alone against the current.*

Another set of fingers grasped my leg, and Siy’s shattered body clawed at me. They were pulling me deeper into the river. I tried to fight them, but they were impossibly strong. My lungs burned as I struggled. I was running

out of air, growing weaker. *This isn't where I'm supposed to die*, I thought wildly, staring down at my cousin's broken face. His eyes were vacant.

Isn't it? I already cried for you that first night, the Wailing Bone whispered. I saw myself with Siy, pushing Elder Rivu into the water, as the Wailing Bone screamed. *And now you've followed me here to rest.*

Together, Rivu and Siy dragged me down, down, down into the river, until the water went cold and the last of the stars winked out.



Ah, but you've heard this story a thousand times, haven't you? The two naughty kits who neglected their duty and broke the Wailing Bone, and the curse that haunted them until they died.

Here's the part your parents won't tell you.

A year after I died, *my* bones washed ashore at the mouth of the canyon. My parents discovered them and took them back to the caravan. They brought back Siy's, too, or as many as they could find; his had been eroded and tumbled to pieces against the rocks. They took me to Elder Kulen, and she carved that familiar, horrible poem into my surface.

Now, when someone dies, I lead the caravan across the sands. I can feel the pull of the desert, and I cry and sob and scream. No one hears me until we reach the place where the dead can rest.

But *I* can hear everything.

I hear how tired you are of traveling with your grandmother's body. It's been weeks of wandering with no end in sight, and the caravan is getting restless. You haven't felt me stir in your paws at all. I've heard the frustration in your voice as you wonder how much longer this will take. And I've heard you talking with Enne about how easy it would be to hide your grandmother in a shallow grave beneath the bluffs.

It would be easy. But I would take care, if I were you. If you're going to act a fool, remember: shirking your duty always has consequences.

And a caravan always needs a Wailing Bone.



THE UNINVITED GUEST

BY KAMI GARCIA

ILLUSTRATED BY
MARK GIBBONS





*Every great goblin invention was born from necessity, bubble gum,
or an accident.*

—Goblin Adage



afternoon, three goblin children were playing at the market while their parents haggled over the prices of detonation cord and explosives. After a bit of showing off, the children began to argue.

“I have four iron coins,” the sassy one said.

“That’s nothing!” the ill-tempered one bragged. “I have five.”

The youngest goblin waved a handful of iron coins in the air. “I’ve got more than both of you.”

An old goblin with ratty teal braids overheard the argument and stopped. She wagged a warning finger at the children. “Keep your voices down and your money in your pockets, or we know who might pay you a visit.”

As the old goblin continued on her way, she sang a nursery rhyme the young goblins knew well:

*In dark of night and bright of day,
Keep in your hand a tossaway.
Guard your fortune, mind your greed,
Or else the Uninvited Guest will feed.*

The children heeded the warning and shoved their money back in their pockets, glancing around as if they could see the invisible creature even the bravest goblins feared. There was only one way to protect themselves and their meager fortunes. As the children ran off, they each threw a tossaway behind them. Every smart goblin carried a few of these shiny gold discs stamped with the face of an ancient trade prince, but few knew the true story of their origin.



It began with a trade prince, a gold waistcoat, and a funeral.

It was an unpleasantly rainy winter day, and Klaxz Boompowder’s mood matched the weather. Normally, the trade prince of the Steamwheedle Cartel looked forward to funerals—what resourceful goblin wouldn’t appreciate one less competitor and another slice of business up for grabs? But the funeral scheduled for this particular afternoon was an exception.

Klaxz waited impatiently as the tailor at his feet hurriedly stitched the back of his gold lamé waistcoat. If he was stuck attending a rival’s funeral, the trade prince intended to look as wealthy as possible while doing it.

Klaxz’s wife, Slix, noticed his foul expression. “Stop sulking,” she said, before applying another coat of bright-purple lipstick to match her straining

silk bustier.

“I’m not carrying that deadbeat’s coffin,” her husband announced. “I don’t care what it says in his will. No self-respecting trade prince would carry a rival’s death box. He cost me the rocket boot deal of a lifetime.”

Slixì narrowed her green eyes. “You will, or you’ll be sleeping in the bathtub,” she shot back, arranging her ratty teal braids on top of her head. “You ain’t embarrassing me at the biggest shindig of the year.”

The day was off to a bad start, and it would only get worse.

Hundreds of goblins stood in line to pay their respects to Rikter Hogsnozzle, the late trade prince of the Bilgewater Cartel—everyone from the bosses of the families in his cartel and their underlings to the welders and shop owners.

The cartel members and the common goblins waited in separate lines, and it wasn’t difficult to tell them apart. The cartel line was a blur of shiny, glittering silk and huge gemstone rings adorning chubby fingers. The wealthier goblins flashed gold and silver smiles as they rested their hands on jeweled dragonhead canes. Some had brought crocolisk suitcases, while others had butlers pushing wheelbarrows.

When Klaxz arrived, he strode to the front of the cartel line. Of course, he took his time so the other goblins could appreciate his opulent attire. Slixì followed suit, waving to the crowd like an exalted queen. Two butlers trailed behind them carrying enormous hydra-hide steamer trunks.

Klaxz tipped his chin to an older goblin wearing a glossy arctic fur coat. “Ripfizzle. It’s been a long time.”



Lyar Ripfizzle flashed a phony, metallic smile. “Not long enough, if you ask me.”

“Still doing the Gurubashi’s dirty work?” Klaxz asked.

“Sure. If that’s what you call making a mint selling them pig-iron blades. Then yeah, I’m rolling in it.”

“What did you bring for the coffin?” Klaxz asked innocently.

Ripfizzle gestured to the wheeled metal bathtub manned by his butler.
“See for yourself, sucker.”

The contents of the bathtub-wagon resembled the piles Slix left behind after cleaning out her closets—a nondescript fur coat, strands of pearls in boring shades of cream and white, a mismatched silver tea service, boxes of sugared croissants and moonberry-filled pastry, and cases of honey wine.

“Is that all you could find in the attic?” Klaxz taunted.

“I should knock your teeth out for insulting me,” Ripfizzle spat, shouldering his way to the viewing platform, determined to go first.

A metal safety rail surrounded the perimeter of the “coffin,” a huge metal shipping container previously used to transport goblin war machines around Azeroth hammered into the familiar funerary shape. The late trade prince’s body rested peacefully atop a mountain of riches—gold and truesilver, gilded furniture and a gemstone-encrusted trampoline, luggage brimming with expensive suits and furs, custom swords and tools, barrels of ale and cases of champagne, all beside packages of sweets and prime cuts of meat. As tradition dictated, goblins were buried with their most valuable and favored possessions so they could enjoy them at the Everlasting Party, the goblin afterlife.

The only thing more important than being buried with one’s possessions were the burial gifts bequeathed to the deceased by other goblins. Gifts were a reflection of wealth and social standing. Klaxz’s butlers emptied the hydra-hide steamer trunks, tossing a plethora of goodies onto the heap. His gifts didn’t cause any mouths to drop, and Ripfizzle stood by, smug with the knowledge that he and his rival had given virtually the same gifts, give or take a gilded toothpick or two.

But Klaxz had saved the best gift for last. He removed a small something from his pocket, and before he tossed it onto the pile, he held the priceless object up for all to see. The ancient gold coin gleamed, and everyone recognized the face of the grinning goblin stamped into the polished metal—the first trade prince.

The crowd sucked in a collective breath, and then the whispering began.

Is it real? Where did it come from? How did Klaxz Boompowder get it? If it is real, why would he give away such a rare treasure?

No one had seen goblin galleons in ages. The once-beloved currency had been lost to time and newer forms of barter.

Ripfizzle pointed at the coin. “You expect us to believe that’s real?”

Klaxz held the coin out to him. “It’s real all right.”

Lyar Ripfizzle snatched the coin and scrutinized it. There was no mistaking the face of the first trade prince staring back at him. Still, Lyar put it between his crooked teeth and bit down to be sure.

It was common knowledge that a goblin funeral was nothing more than an excuse to throw a party with someone else footing the bill, and Klaxz was now the center of attention.

“Where did you get it?” Ripfizzle asked in awe.

“That’s *my* secret,” Klaxz said with a satisfied smile. He took the galleon, rubbed it between his palms dramatically, and tossed it into the opulent coffin.

The goblins in the crowd gasped, watching the coin arc in the air and finally land on the deceased goblin’s unnecessarily frilly shirt. They had no way of knowing that the coin was a fake.

Klaxz had switched the real galleon for the worthless one resting on Hogsnozzle’s body. He wasn’t about to part with the precious treasure. He had spent years diving the underwater rock caves in search of the legendary coins. Slixix had mocked the excursions until the fateful day a year ago when he had finally returned from the South Sea with six galleons.

After the gifting ended, the lid of the enormous container was soldered shut. Klaxz and many others danced on top of it to usher the deceased on to the Everlasting Party as the other goblins watched.

Normally, prominent goblins served as pallbearers at the head of the coffin, while goblins contractually obligated to serve as pack mules carried the rear. But even with thousands of goblins in attendance, Hogsnozzle’s coffin wouldn’t budge, and the Bilgewater Cartel had to bring in cranes to place it in the cavernous hole at the burial site. Once Hogsnozzle was safely in the ground, the festivities truly began. It was common knowledge that a

goblin funeral was nothing more than an excuse to throw a party with someone else footing the bill, and Klaxz was now the center of attention. The other goblins marveled as he gorged on the buffet—a pudding fountain, towers of iced goblin shortbread and funnel cake, roasted k’bab, and aged bear steaks and boar ribs smothered in cheesy sauces.

But unbeknownst to Klaxz, he had attracted the attention of something else.

The creature watched from the shadows. It wasn’t a goblin or a troll, or a gnome, elf, or orc. It was something unseen and unknowable, an uninvited guest waiting in the darkness. Unbridled greed had attracted the creature to the funeral. Greed so all-consuming that it yielded a breach in etiquette so great that it offended the dead and extended an irrevocable invitation to a guest no goblin would ever care to meet. Now the creature stalked the shadows, sensing the true nature of the funeral goers in a way that allowed it to see beyond the limits of sight.

If Klaxz Boompowder had known the creature was out there, perhaps he wouldn’t have chosen the gold lamé jacket or brought his finest hydra-hide steamer trunks. Perhaps he wouldn’t have thrown a worthless, painted-gold galleon into the burial trove. Perhaps that would have saved him. But nobody will ever know, because that night the creature—the Uninvited Guest, as it would come to be known—followed him home.

The Uninvited crossed the threshold before the butler closed the door—although, truth be told, it could’ve walked straight through the walls. It glided up the stairs and crossed the hall only steps behind Klaxz. It lurked behind the door as he removed his waistcoat and tugged the rings off his pudgy green fingers.

The creature sensed the greed that gripped Klaxz’s thoughts that night as he settled beneath the covers. With a tired, satisfied grin, the goblin pictured the coffin filled with riches and Rikter Hogsnozzle’s corpse nestled amongst jewels and furs, silver goblets, and gold bars.

As Klaxz closed his eyes that night and visions of galleons and rare black pearls unfurled in his mind, the Uninvited was there beside him—barely an inch away, its mouth open—feeding.

With the goblin’s every thought, the Uninvited Guest grew stronger and more powerful. But the creature would never get its fill. Its belly was a

bottomless pit, an unfathomable black hole constantly gnawing with emptiness.

Forgiving a few debts felt strangely normal. Why not?

Klaxz awoke the next morning feeling right as rain. He went about his day as if nothing had happened. Slixix didn't notice anything different about him either—not until his bruiser, Bang, arrived during lunch.

“We’ve got a problem, boss,” Bang said, dreading the trade prince’s reaction. “The arms runners in Booty Bay are short again. Whatcha want me to do?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Klaxz said between bites of funnel cake. “The cartel has plenty of money.”

“Boss?” Bang stared, dumbfounded.

Slixix stared at her husband with a creeping sense of unease.

“You heard me.” Klaxz waved him away. Forgiving a few debts felt strangely normal. Why not? The cartel had plenty of money, after all.

Bang would never challenge the trade prince, but later that day, when Klaxz failed to haggle over the price of a load of explosives the cartel delivered, the bruiser knew something was terribly wrong. He alerted Slixix, but that was only the beginning.

The next morning, Slixix caught Klaxz sorting through her jewelry.

“I was thinking we should give away some of these,” he said, holding up an armload of necklaces laden with twilight opals and black diamonds.

Slixix gathered her necklaces and clutched them to her chest. “Have you lost your mind? What’s wrong with you?”

She couldn’t see the invisible vortex of shadow slithering around her husband’s body, curling around his neck, and sliding into his ears.

Klaxz felt a heaviness in his chest, but his thoughts were not his own. He shrugged off his wife’s questions and wandered off in search of other extravagances they didn’t need.

The Uninvited moved with him, parasitic and constantly feeding.

No one could see it writhing around the trade prince while he ate breakfast, during cartel meetings, and as he slept. They couldn’t see the way

it smothered him, filling his orifices, and then undulating out of them like swirling black liquid.

The trade prince couldn't feel it either. Sometimes he felt a tugging deep in his belly, like the annoying nag of hunger. But then it would disappear as quickly as it had surfaced.



Klaxx Boompowder's behavior grew more erratic and unusual every day. One minute he was forgiving loans and offering steep discounts, and the next he was giving away arctic furs and polished gems. His behavior confused the other goblins and alarmed the members of his cartel.

The trade prince hadn't been in an accident, and he didn't look sick to the naked eye. What could cause such horrific conduct? Sane goblins did not offer discounts and give away their valuables. No one could see the creature consuming his thoughts of wealth before he was even conscious of having them.

Slixix suspected another trade prince had arranged for a necromancer to put a curse on her husband. There was simply no other explanation. She sent Bang and cartel spies on a fact-finding mission to uncover the truth. While they were gone, the situation turned dire. At night, she heard Klaxz mumbling about freeing himself from the weight of their possessions. The next day he began giving away their belongings.

“We have more than we need,” Klaxz explained as he rooted through closets and steamer trunks for items to purge.

“Watch your mouth!” she spat. “Your shenanigans are disgracing the cartel and me.”

When her husband approached their personal vault, Slixix took matters into her own hands. She hit him over the head with a frying pan and knocked him out. It was for Klaxz’s own good, she reasoned. He would send them to the poorhouse if he kept this up.

She opened the vault and removed the remaining galleons. She had to protect their fortune from Klaxz until she found a way to break the mysterious spell she believed had been cast upon him. Slixix carried the galleons into the woods, careful to ensure that no one followed her. Once there, she dug a deep hole in the earth and buried the treasure. Her husband couldn’t squander what he couldn’t find.

But any hope of uncovering the source of Klaxz’s madness was extinguished when Bang returned from his mission. He had nothing but bad news. There was no word of a spell against the trade prince, only dark tales of poisonings and ancient hexes gone awry and old legends about malevolent otherworldly creatures that preyed on unsuspecting beings. An aging troll told a tale about an invisible evil that fed on the living, sucking the souls of its victims dry and leaving them mad.

“Is it the same creature?” Slixix wondered. “Or a similar monster?”

“No way to tell unless you find the thing and lure it outside under a full moon,” he said. “That’s the only way to see it, apparently.”

Unfortunately, the moon wasn’t full that night. At dinner, Slixix sat across from her husband, who didn’t touch his meal. She kept her gaze trained on him, watching his chest rise and fall in even breaths. A thick—and invisible—trail of liquid shadow reached for Klaxz, encircling his neck in a suffocating cloud of blackness.

“Why aren’t you eating?” she demanded, dropping her fork with a clatter.

The shadow pressed in tighter, attaching itself to the vertebrae in her husband’s neck. “I’m not hungry.”

The black shadow pulsed like a dark heartbeat.

“Why the hell not?” she snapped.

The Uninvited snaked into Klaxz’s ear.

“We always have so much food. Why not—”

“Do not say *share*!” Slixi shouted as she hurled her plate at the floor.

Klaxz didn’t even flinch when it smashed against the tile.



In the days that followed, Klaxz’s mood improved as his affliction worsened. Ridding himself of his possessions seemed to bring him what Slixi considered a disturbing sense of euphoria. If she turned her back for a minute, he was out the door and off to plunder something else. It was impossible to watch him every second, which was how he managed to slip out on a rainy afternoon with his pockets full of jewels.

Slixi searched the entire house before she realized he was gone, and he had already given away most of the jewelry by the time she found him in the market.

The Uninvited Guest was still in the house. And it was still hungry.

She cornered him behind the blacksmith’s tent. “Why are you doing this? Just tell me the truth. Are you under a spell? Did you forget what our life was like before?”

The Uninvited rummaged around in his head, searching for rogue thoughts of greed.

“I remember it perfectly,” he said matter-of-factly. “That’s why I’m donating all this. Our greed was a prison. I’m setting us free.”

Slixix narrowed her eyes. “Then I’d rather be in prison.”

An old goblin limped past them, and Klaxz shoved a necklace into the goblin’s rucksack. “Charity will fill us with joy, Slixix.”

Her stomach turned at the thought, and at the next one.

What if I can’t save my husband ... or myself?

Days later, Slixix arrived home to find Klaxz missing and her house completely empty inside—not a sock or a loaf of bread to be found. She tore out of the house in a fit of rage.

“I’ll kill Klaxz myself when I find him!” she roared.

Slixix found him wandering at the edge of town with a handful of stones. He had given away everything they owned, and now he was handing out stones as if they were as valuable as pearls. She tried to persuade him to return to the house, but he refused.

“It’s not ours anymore,” he explained as he walked toward the sunset. “I gave it to Ripfizzle.”

Slixix never saw her husband again after that night.

But Klaxz was wrong about one thing. He had left something behind at the house, even if he hadn’t realized it.

Slixix knew it the moment she set foot inside.

That was when she felt it for the first time—an icy, slithering sensation that moved up the back of her neck. Her blood ran cold, and the truth hit her like a stone. The nameless, faceless creature preying on her husband ... it hadn’t gone with him.

The Uninvited Guest was still in the house. And it was still hungry.

Slixix ran for the front door and tore into the dark night, propelled by fear and desperation. She had nothing left, thanks to Klaxz. He had given away everything.

“Not everything,” she whispered.

Slixix stumbled toward the woods, tripping over branches and vines. She found the spot and threw herself to the ground. She couldn’t see the creature, but the chill on the back of her neck told her it was out there watching her. She dug up the galleons with her bare hands as fast as she could and gathered them up in the bottom of her shirt. Her heart thudded in her chest as she rushed through the woods.

Keep going, she thought, without knowing if she would be truly safe anywhere.

As she ran past a gnarled tree, her foot caught on a root. She hurtled through the air and hit the ground hard. A wave of dizziness hit her, and she had the sinking feeling that this was the end.

When Slixix's head stopped spinning, she took a deep breath and glanced behind her. The coins were scattered across the road, and it looked as if they were moving. *Impossible*. She must have hit her head harder than she thought. She looked back again, and that's when she realized ... the coins were moving in a familiar way.

They pushed away from the pile one at a time, lining up in a neat row as if someone—or *something*—was counting them.

One. Two. Three. Four.

The coins continued to line up.

The creature was counting them like a child learning to make change.

Slixix collected the coins closest to her and backed away slowly. She held her breath as she crossed a patch of moonlight, terrified the Uninvited would notice her. When the darkness engulfed her once again, a swell of hope rose inside her. She knew the creature didn't need light to see her; it had found her in the darkness only moments ago. But the darkness provided a false sense of security, and she closed her eyes for a second to catch her breath.

Tiny pinpricks crawled up her spine, and she realized her mistake. She opened her eyes, and they darted to the road.

The coins had stopped moving.

Slixix tossed the last galleons behind her, and they landed in the patch of moonlight. As she turned to run, she caught a glimpse of a blurry form hovering over the coins—a vortex of liquid shadow stretching to lengthen and create fingers. The creature had no eyes, just two darkened hollows above an enormous black void Slixix assumed was its mouth.

Gold glimmered in the moonlight as one of the coins was pushed away from the pile.

But she didn't stop to watch the Uninvited count them.

Slixix Boompowder ran, and she escaped that night, perhaps because she had nothing left on which the creature could feed—no money and not an ounce of greed left in her.

She settled in a tiny cottage, and of course a girl has to make a living, so Slixix did what goblins do best. She tinkered and invented something of value, at least to goblinhood: shiny, painted-gold coins that looked exactly

like galleons. She stamped them with the face of the first trade prince and called them tossaways. The harrowing tale of Klaxz's fate spread, and every goblin who heard it rushed to the market to buy tossaways from his clever widow.

The Uninvited Guest roams Azeroth to this day, so if you meet a penniless goblin, throw a few tossaways behind you to avoid becoming the creature's next victim. Klaxz Boompowder still wanders the land as well, offering gifts to whoever will accept them. Some say that on quiet nights, you can hear an old woman's voice reciting a familiar rhyme:

*In dark of night and bright of day,
Keep in your hand a tossaway.
Guard your fortune, mind your greed,
Or else the Uninvited Guest will feed.*





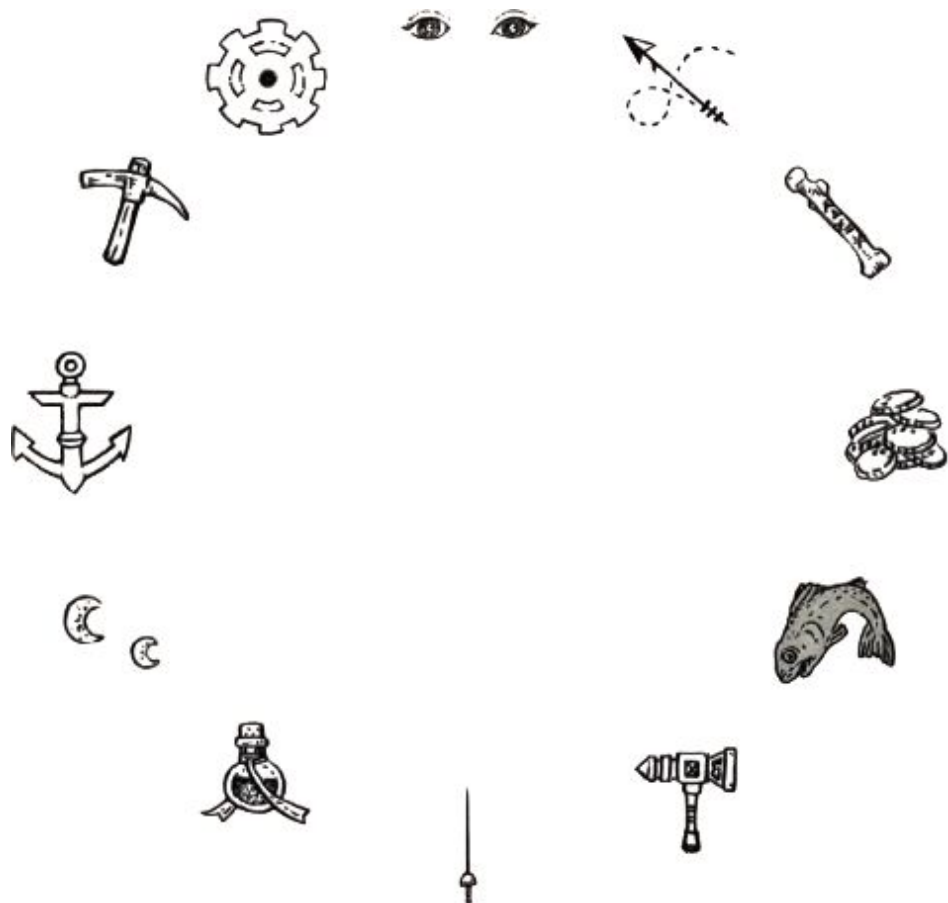
SISTER IS ANOTHER WORD FOR *ALWAYS*

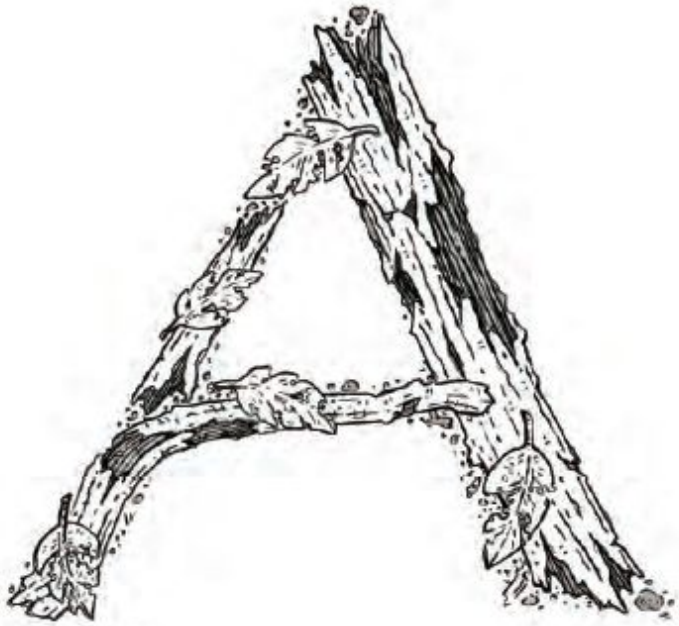
BY CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE



ILLUSTRATED BY
ZOLTAN BOROS







cold crevice opened up in

the bones of my chest. Not a pain. Not a wound. Just a chasm as deep as the dark. A blue crack through which every freezing bladed wind could blow until they made a song of marrow and loss, and the song was never-ending, and the song was her last breath leaving the green world forever.

**I was the Sister of Sorrow, for sorrow
was all of me that remained living. She
was the Sister of Courage, for courage
was what had killed her.**

That is what I felt when my sister died. Miles away, beyond sight or reach of sound, but her death passed through me on its way beyond the edge of sunlight all the same. A bottomless hole of ice blew through the center of my hot, bright heart. The last of my family, floating away from my

outstretched hands like a red leaf in autumn. I staggered to my knees at the moment of her murder, and I think there is some part of me that never got up again. There are blows the soul cannot take standing.

Who was I, without her? I could not even remember my own name. Even hers seemed to fade like fog. They tumbled down into that sudden frigid canyon inside me. What meaning could a name have when the family that gave it life had vanished from the face of the world? I had become alone. I had become loneliness. I was the Sister of Sorrow, for sorrow was all of me that remained living. She was the Sister of Courage, for courage was what had killed her.

Courage, and *him*.

All I desired then was to rest, or to die with her. It was much the same to me. I sought forgetfulness with the fervor of a lover. I tried to sleep, to find in unconsciousness an end to the song of the sucking wind in my breast. But the cold song would not allow rest. It would not allow sleep. It would not allow forgetfulness. When I closed my eyes, I saw nothing of the oblivion I craved.

I saw her. I saw us: *Two girls, still children yet, playing on the banks of the rushing wide river that ran through the center of the woods. Past the treetops, we can see the spires of noble glass and ivory and marble towering like candles on a mage's table. On the riverbanks, we dance and sing as though we lived, just the two of us, in the primeval heart of a secret forest.*

I tossed and turned, trying to escape the memory into blessed blackness, but it would not relent.

My sister dances up ahead of me, fearless through the long grass. The wild white roses and glowing crimson bloodthistle lick at her bare feet. She carries a crown of them in her hand as she leaps easily across the smooth stones in the shallows of the water. "Wait," I cry after her. "Wait for me. I'm only little. I can't catch you!" And she does wait, laughing, beckoning me close. I crouch down next to her. I hear nothing of the sounds of the great city. I see nothing of its bustling shops and excitement. I have ears only for her quick, light breath and spirit only for her sparkling, mischievous gray eyes as we bend our heads together, her hair like the sweet flesh of late-summer apples, mine the white of starlit snow.

"Let me show you something," she whispers.

She relaxes her long, lithe body, from the crown of her head to her naked toes. Her face becomes so soft and sweet I feel as though if I touch it, she will melt away under my fingertips like honey in the rain. Even the angle of her chin is suddenly so peaceful and kind I can hardly bear to look at it. And just when I am about to burst into tears, my sister tenderly, slowly dips her hand into the river water and scoops out a brilliant silver-white fish. I think it is a mithril-head trout, but it is only a baby yet, and it's hard to tell. It stares up at her with dark eyes and nuzzles into her palm, suckling against her flesh. Water drips away through her fingers, back down into the rushing current.

"Is it magic?" I ask breathlessly.

She shakes her head no.

"What, then?" I say, barely able to breathe, in case my stupid coarse breath breaks the spell. "How did you do it?"

"Gentleness only," my sister says.

"Well, I say it's magic," I insist stubbornly.

"Perhaps," she answers with a sad half smile. "But the world thinks not so."

She watches the fish gasp for water, finding only air and love. It does not struggle; it wants love more than life. But the thrashing of its silver tail is slowing down. And perhaps she watches it gulp and twist a little too long.

"Let it go," I urge her. "We can't take it with us. It's against the rules. Besides, Mother would never allow it."

My sister laughs. The moment bursts like a fall of plum petals. She lets the little trout slide easily through her fingers and back into the river. It darts joyfully away into the green deeps. She begins to stretch her legs—and stumbles on the slippery river-rocks. I reach out my skinny arms without a thought, so fast it seems to happen before the stumble ever came. And I catch her, pulling her back from the churning river as I could not when we were grown. I was so far away when she slipped for the last time.

My sister laughs again. She places the crown of wild white roses and glimmering bloodthistle on my head and kisses my nose, and then she is gone again, running ahead, into the brilliant pale sun—

—and I woke screaming, and she was still gone, and the river of our childhood games was a long-dead scar through a shattered city, and the little

trout and all its descendants had gulped and twisted their last on the desolate land.

I gave up with the sunrise. When I emerged from my tent, the war camp lay silent, dreaming their own dreams no less miserable than mine. I felt nothing for them any longer, or for the war. It would burn on with or without me. If Courage could not stop it, then Sorrow had no hope. I had nothing left to fight for, nothing beautiful to preserve from the ravaging. Only the crack in my heart. Only the memory of her, raising that tiny glittering fish out of the water over and over and over again until I thought my mind would break under the weight of her knowing gray eyes.

If the song in my shattered breast wanted me to listen so fiercely, well enough. I would follow where it wound. I stilled the sounds of my mind and my silly, insignificant duties and worries and ambitions, the way I once, when I was young, stilled the sounds of a bustling, thriving city. I opened my senses only to the blue chasm and the freezing song of wind slicing down the glaciers of my grief.

The song led me far from the fighting plains, into forests so dense and deep the only light was fireflies dancing. The forests then became deserts, the earth red and cracked and peeling as a laundress's hands, and not a drop of water to slick my lips but my own tears. I grew lean in those places. I lost the hardness and thickness of a soldier. My skin sank in against my bones. I ate no noble pilgrim's waybread, but only what ran or swam or flew slower than myself, and to each of their bones I sang a hymn. When the desert broke itself on the banks of a vast river, I gorged myself on water until I was sick. When the current proved too furious, I hewed a raft from fallen boughs so as to cut no living limb. And when the river wizened to a stream, I kissed the silver wavelets in thanks for their company and put my knees to the great mountains.

The trees changed from generous, thick-leaved oaks to thin, miserly, needled pines whose first branches did not begin until they'd soared ten feet off the ground. And then the pines disappeared too. Though it was summer yet, frost prickled the earth, and then snow, heavy and without forgiveness. Still I listened to the hole my sister had carved in me and pressed on, on and up. Much as I wished it, I had not passed beyond the needs of flesh. I did as flesh must. When I found the gates of black glass, it was with the taste of white bear in my mouth and the fur of black wolf on my back.

I could go no farther on; I could go no farther up.

Wind keened and bayed, not only through the blue chasm in me but through glassy volcanic crags ringing a lonesome graveyard like a crown of night. Scattered tombstones and deep mausoleums rose up from the winter hardscrabble in twin curved rows, arching out from a pair of statues in the center of that abandoned place. Elven women, sitting back to back on the ground, legs drawn up to their chests in grief. One was carved with long unkempt hair, tangled with stony ivy and chestnut burrs, her head sunk miserably in her elbows. Her left arm lay limp and listless on the snow. Her right arm rested on her frosted kneecaps, reaching hopelessly toward the west wing of graves. Short, neat curls framed the face of the other woman. She folded her arms thoughtfully across her knees and perched a deftly sculpted chin on her crossed wrists, staring toward the east wing with a resolute expression. Snow piled up between their granite fingers.

In the folds of their chiseled gowns their names were carved:

ACCEPTANCE and REGRET.

No flowers or fruits decorated the monuments. No keepsakes rested against the doors to the crypts. No one had journeyed here to weep for a long, long time.

At last, the song in my bones was silent. But for hours, nothing took its place save the slow, inevitable encroaching of ice and my own blood beating in vain against the thick, tantalizing sleep of the cold.

Finally, a voice rose out of the storm. A voice, and then a body, blue as death and the sky, wrapped in white silks that snapped like war flags in the wind. She opened her pale wings so wide I could not see their end; her bare blue toes did not touch the earth. A great hood shadowed her face, and beneath it she wore a blindfold of ivory linen. But for all that to hide it, her face was the twin of the statue watching thoughtfully over the eastern tombs.

“My child, why do you weep? It is not yet your time,” the watcher said in an ice wine voice.

I was never a fool. I knew what she was at a glance. Anyone who has fought in battle and seen her companions take terrible enough injuries has heard those tortured lips speak of the winged ones that stand between us and all that goes beyond.



“You cannot even see me. How can you know?”

“I am blinded so that nothing can distract me from my service. I need no mortal eyes to smell the spark of life in you still flaming, dear Sister Sorrow, or to hear your breath cry out in anguish, or to taste the salt of your tears thickening the air, and were I to touch you—” The spirit healer swooped down toward me with unearthly swiftness and took my face in her azure

hands. I gasped at the hiss of her cold skin against my warm body. “What sight would tell me more of your sad tale than the pulse of your shattered heart, cracking your veins like river ice? You have the favor of Elomia. Now speak, as you have come so far to do.”

All those long steps across the plain and marsh and tundra, out of the oak and into the pine, I had planned my beautiful speech to whomever I found at the end of my pilgrimage. I would break their heart with the perfection of my words, with the precision of my grief. I would make them live in my palm like the tiny mithril-head trout, suckling wild against my hand for a taste of the love I had known. I would make them see every inch of my soul and the soul of my sister, *feel* every ounce of the injustice on their own backs until they held up their hands and cried, *No more! It is too much to bear.*

I whispered the only lyric the song of the chasm ever had: “I want my sister back.”

But in the end, in the embrace of the spirit healer, at the top of the world, hungry and exhausted and gasping for release, I forgot it all. My body crumpled, from the crown of my head to my toes. I hung limp and gentle from her great heavy hands and cried like a child. I whispered the only lyric the song of the chasm ever had: “I want my sister back.”

Elomia was still for a long while. Then slowly, she wiped my tears with her blue fingers. “There, there,” she said with infinite comfort. “Do not weep so. Not all the spheres of the afterlives are beyond pity. Many come before me with grand and woeful sagas, with treasure to bribe and blades to threaten, justifying their need above all others with philosophy and logic so pure the touch of air cannot rot it. They received naught but my silence. Yet you bring none of this. No gifts, no weapons, no oratory. In fact, you bring nothing at all, nothing but love and loss. I am moved, and when blind judgment is moved, all the doors of possibility shall open.” Elomia drew back and laid her hand upon the mournful head of the statue of Regret. A black door opened in her stone gown. “You seek your sister, Courage,” the watcher said. “Very well: go and find her.” She held up a warning hand. “But

know that it is folly, my child. Know that it would serve your poor heart best to let go of this pain and forget. Know that there is no reward in this but a deeper, richer agony. If you could see as I see, if you could but glimpse what is to come, you would ask nothing of me but a swift journey home and a warm bed at its end.”

I did not understand. Not then, and not for many, many years. I could see nothing but Courage, her pale-yellow hair shining, running ahead of me through the rivergrass, through the wild roses. “I *cannot* forget her. She is my sister. Does your kind not have such things?”

Elomia said nothing, but a milky diamond tear slipped down her strange blue cheek. She dropped her hand and moved aside. The shadowy door in the statue yawned down into nothing. I pulled my lynx-cloak tight and moved toward it.

“Bring me the soul of your sister, and I shall restore it to this ruined world. But you must convince her to come of her own true will. You may not touch her, not once, not for the smallest moment, or all you have suffered shall be for naught. Should so much as a single strand of your hair brush against her brow, she shall be lost forever, and you, Sorrow, must return to the battles of the living and trouble me no more until your time tolls at last. Do you understand?”

I nodded. What a sweet kind of symmetry the spirit healer offered, as though it was a warning dire and dreadful! I had spent half my life convincing my sister to do what I wanted. This would be no different.

For the first time since a knight of death spilled out my sister’s blood on the fields of our home, I felt no worry, no pain, nothing but certainty. I stepped joyfully into the dark—



—and into a rosy-violet dusk in a dreaming forest.

The cold was gone, as though the world had never gotten round to inventing it. The warm breeze smelled of good moss and wildflowers and baking cakes. Thick, soft grass rolled out before me like the richest tapestry, tumbling through banks of huge, twisting trees as wide around as fortress

towers, down into crisscrossing brooks and streams that giggled lightly through purple and blue boulders. Green fireflies and great stags' eyes glinted in the gloaming, creatures with ultramarine wings or long furred legs and glowing horns, but every one scampered or fluttered or galloped off the moment I looked in their direction. Curling violet blooms tottered on spindly stems, glowing softly, blue and pink and lavender. Cobwebs sparkled with dew; leaves cast dappled emerald shadows. There was a pleasant, whispering tension in the air, as there is in the hours before a great festival. Barely suppressed laughter, the breath sucked in just before someone plays their flute, merry fires just about to burst from the brush into the kindling.

I pressed farther into the wood as if I knew this forest. I smiled as I ran my fingers along the bark of one of the great trees beyond time. She would be here, of course she would, in this place where good hearts go. This forest would call our natures as true as a horn. We are creatures of the wood, and to the wood we must return, no matter how wide we have roamed or how high we have risen.

But no one came to greet me. The tension went on and on. The laughter did not laugh, the flute did not play, the fire did not spark. I felt as though I could see the flash of a heel or the swirl of a skirt around every tree and mushroom, but when I reached it, I found nothing but more grass and more trees and more fireflies. The scent of cakes and flowers grew stronger, overpowering. I covered my face with my sleeve to drive off the perfume.

"Sister of mine!" I cried into the many-colored shadows. "I am here! I have come! Where are you?"

A worried rustle through the branches answered me. A dimming of the fireflies and the mushrooms.

And the earth before me bulged sickeningly, then sagged, then opened like a terrible blind mouth, sucking and gnashing at all that sweet, thick grass and deep soil. I turned to run. I called out for my ancestors. But the mouth was everywhere, as wide as the past. It opened beneath my feet as I snatched a gnarled, tangled root and swung violently out over the void inside it. I hung hopelessly over a sheer pit for a moment or two before the screams began. They swarmed up from the depths of the mouth, thousands and more, screaming for release, for an end to suffering, clutching at my boots and my limbs to save themselves.

The root wriggled in my hand. I held tighter. It writhed with disgust and shook me free, dropping me down into the screams and the shadows. The tension broke, but not with flutes or laughter or bonfires. Only with my falling as far from the forest as it was possible to fall.



I did not land so much as land formed beneath me. Wretched, dry, cracked, heaving land, a desert, but unlike any desert in which I had thirsted on my long journey. The earth glowed gray where it was not red, broken where it did not twist into cruel spires of rock puncturing a brutal sky the color of a bruise. Screams darted and whirled over the landscape like vicious songbirds, not issued from guts or lungs. They had a life all their own.

I got to my feet and tried to understand where I was. Nothing to the north, west, or south but more tortured earth—but to the east flickered the lights of a city. If not a city, at least a fortress—or a prison. The screams seemed to love it best. They swooped down through its towers and battlements, howled through the windows and perched on its buttresses and rattled its vicious gates. And they swirled in a maelstrom around its massive, miserable spire, rising up out of the fortress and into the furious sky, where it met another spire reaching down, and between them lightning boomed and forked and collided.

I was never a fool. My sister could not be here. She could never be *here*—here in this pit of purposeless suffering. She had done nothing wrong. She had been kind and brave and clever. She had fought to defend her home and sacrificed all she loved for the right. Why would the Sister of Courage ever come near this reeking wreck of a hell?

**“Have you seen my sister, Courage?” I
whispered miserably, my lips as dry as
the scar that marked my home.**

I made for the great jail at the end of all, though I wanted nothing less in all my life. Shapes moved inside, shapes and crimson, fiery light. I dragged myself across the wasteland to the great prison. There were no souls free to guide me.

So I asked the screams as they passed me by: “Have you seen my sister, Courage? Has she come to this damned place?”

But the screams howled: *There is no courage here, beyond the curtain of fear!*

So I asked the blasted rocks: “Have you seen my sister, Courage? Has she passed over these cursed stones?”

But the stones said: *You will find no courage here, beyond the mask of virtue!*

So I asked the bruised sky: “Have you seen my sister, Courage? Did she walk beneath these doomed stars?”

But the sky answered only: *Courage is banished here, beyond the shield of hope!*

And all of them shrieked: *You do not belong here. You do not belong here. You do not belong here. Get out, elf-cur. Get out.*

No, she could not be here. They were right. The screams, the spires, the skies, the chains. No one as sweet as my sister could live in this mire. The land itself could not tolerate her. It would buckle at the touch of her foot.

I came at last to the edge of the prison grounds. To the gargantuan chains that lashed it to the mountains on all sides. It seemed like years had passed. I could feel my bones turning brittle, my blood turning to ashen sludge. But even now the damnable spire would give me nothing. I could not cross over. Mist and clouds whorled and knotted and unspooled around the tower like a moat, a river of miasma.

I sat down heavily on its banks, hopeless. Where else could I seek? Where could I go when I had come so far, yet my sister was no closer than she had been when I slept in my own tent with my own bow beside me in another world?

I felt a presence. A shadow deepened over my shoulder, seeping into the ground before me. A shadow that was more than the absence of light. A shadow that *ate* light and gave nothing in return.

I did not turn around. I did not get up. The hole in my heart was too heavy for any of that. I drew my knees up to my chest and sank my head in

my arms like the frozen statue far beyond me.

“Have you seen my sister, Courage?” I whispered miserably, my lips as dry as the scar that marked my home.

The shadow offered silence. Silence and a terrible, unwholesome heat.

“You will not find her here,” its voice thundered finally.

“I know,” I murmured. “She could never be here.”

“Not yet.” Something like confidence and mockery simmered in the voice’s tone.

I turned and looked up into the sour-hot blue eyes of a giant. Dark spikes and blazing runes covered his massive body and his bald, unyielding skull. The sinews and muscles of him swelled so huge and tense they looked agonizing, meat straining to split the skin. His fists could have swallowed the whole of me. And in the center of his chest yawned a sucking black hole surrounded by hooks of bone dragging it open.

I laid my head on my forearm and sighed. I had no strength left in me for awe or fear.

“I have a hole in my heart like that,” I said gently.

His glowing eyes burned expressionlessly into mine. Hot orange sparks from the million fires of the wasteland tumbled through the air, disappearing into the chasm of his chest.

“Everyone does,” he said slowly. “It is only that mine is easy to see.”

I sucked in fetid air through my nose. Tears slid down my cheeks and hissed where they fell on the thirsty earth.

“Are you the master of this place?” I asked.

He seemed to consider, as though this were a question of grave importance. “Yes,” he growled finally. “But equally is it mine.” He shook his gargantuan head. “Go from this place,” boomed the warden of the damned. “You do not belong here. Go home and forget me. Forget her. Forget all but the fires of the living, for they do not linger long.”

“I cannot,” I said. “She’s my sister. Does your kind not have such things?”

The Banished One laughed. His laugh sent the screams into a frenzy, and I felt the bones of my limbs tighten as though they meant to snap.

“*Family* is only a title for those who can hurt you more piercingly than the rest,” he said, and his voice was soft suddenly, as soft as the dust left at the end of destruction. “My blood kin betrayed me to this fate. I would not

take a single step for the sake of their souls. Nor should you. There is no balm to be found in the blood that binds, only the blood that is spilled. You must go. Courage cannot be found here.” He cocked his head to one side abruptly. Then he smiled. A smile of cruelty and hunger. And his smile annihilated the last of my heart.

He turned his impossible back to me and strode slowly toward the cutting black tower, toward his home. And the truth is, for a time I sat in something like peace on the edge of perdition, unbothered by the screams, untroubled by the hideous sky. I watched the loops and eddies of the cloud-current swirling round the spire of punishment. As long as I didn’t look anywhere else, it was almost beautiful. Golden and crimson, frothing whitewater air.

The Banished One looked backward at me over his armored shoulder. Was that pity in his twisted gaze? No, not pity, but not malice either. He let his great fist fall to his side above the churning current.

And then I saw it. Just a flash, a flash of silver leaping from his palm. It raced into the downdraft and leaped to catch the updraft, wiggling through the river of clouds. Something alive. Something alive and noble and striving in all this burning death.

It was her. Somehow, I knew it.

I called out to it, and the glimmer of silver paused. Then it dove down again, and I ran along the banks of the river of despair, laughing and dancing and calling out to my sister as she darted away ahead of me, glittering wherever the firelight of oblivion touched her, a candle in a storm. I called out again, more urgently, but she only swam faster through the miasma.

“Wait!” I screamed after her, my scream joining the others, the million billion others as they cackled and took my cry into their cacophony. “Wait for me! I’m only little! I can’t catch you!”

The flash of silver stopped. It turned around and struggled valiantly against the undercurrent, writhing toward me. I shouted with delight, and the chorus of screams ate that too, but I didn’t care. It flitted to and fro below me, nervous, unsure. I sat down on the edge of the river and relaxed my long, lithe body, from the crown of my head to my toes. I felt my face grow soft and sweet, as though I would melt away to nothing if I touched my own cheek. Remembering what Elomia said, I tore off my black wolf’s cloak and

tenderly, slowly dipped its hood into the sulfurous river and scooped out the brilliant, silver-white soul of my sister.

But was it truly her soul? It seemed only a fragment somehow, a sliver of her, dancing with light. A little baby mithril-head trout, with her knowing eyes staring back at me, nuzzling the wolf-fur that covered my palm. Mist seeped away into the pelt and dripped back down into the mire. Any piece of her was worth enduring this trial.

The fish-fragment shimmered and thrashed in my hood, and then it *was* her, all of her, standing as tall as she ever did, poised as if to run on the edge of a land abhorrent to her nature, her golden hair in a long braid, her gray eyes shining, her face young and full of possibility.

“Is it magic?” she asked breathlessly.

I shook my head no.

“What then? How did you do it?”

Tears overflowed my eyes, and I choked on the sobs that had not come when she died. “Love,” I said.

“I love you. I missed you.”

Courage laughed. “Well, *I* say it’s magic,” she insisted stubbornly.

“Perhaps,” I answered, and my smile was full. “Perhaps it is at that.”

**Tears overflowed my eyes, and I choked
on the sobs that had not come when she
died. “Love,” I said. “I love you. I
missed you.”**

My sister reached for me, but I shrank away. I was never a fool. “Not yet,” I whispered. “But soon. Soon, and forever. Now we must run.”

But the shadow stretched long over us, even as we ran across the blasted plains, even as the screams followed us, bellowing for thieves and intruders, even as the skies themselves sent up alarms, and shadows are so much faster than flesh. The man with the empty heart strode across the land without concern and blocked our path.

“Let us go,” I begged. “You said I could go.”

“And you may. But *that* may not.”

“She is my sister,” I pleaded.

“A piece of her, perhaps. But it is not for you.”

The Banished One raised a hideous mace dripping with the same blue fire of his eyes. I reached for my bow, and before the wind could gasp, three arrows bristled from his massive shoulder. But he did not seem to care. He swung the mace around his head once; I fired again. Three more in his neck. Fluid seeped hotly down his gargantuan shoulders, searing the skin. But he cared nothing for that either.

He swung the mace a second time around his brutal skull. I pulled my knife from my belt and threw it true. It turned end over end in the deathly light and fell into the chasm of his heart.

And that knife did not even slow his final swing.

But the man with the empty heart did not swing for me. He swung for her. The spiked head of that mace drove down through the thick, volcanic air, and I ran for her. I ran, but it fell faster, straight through the gleam of her soul. She stared for a moment. She clutched her chest, mouth open wide with no scream to fill it. Then she stumbled.

I was a fool. I was always a fool. By instinct, by silly, years-bred instinct, I reached out my skinny arms without a thought, so fast it seemed to happen before the stumble ever came. And I caught her as she fell, pulling her back from the ruined earth as I did when we were young and the city thrummed beyond us, the whole future thrummed beyond us. I caught her in my arms, her body sinking into mine, her gray eyes looking up with sudden understanding and sorrow.

“No, no, no!” I cried out. “It’s all right. It’s all right.”



I didn't—Elomia! I didn't intend to. It was just a second. An accident. No, no—”

The heavy sky boomed and cracked with laughter. My head snapped round to see the Banished One, bent double, hands on his rune-marked thighs, snickering to the ruined earth.

“*Why?*” I shrieked at him. “Why? Why give me a chance? Why give her to me only to take her back?”

The warden of the damned clicked his tongue against his ugly teeth in satisfaction. “I wanted to watch you fail. I see every type of failure here in the land of foundered souls. You would never succeed, despite what a watcher may have espoused. You are nothing. You are no one. And above all

that, my little fish needed to know the truth: family always falters. Family always fails. Kinship is a blight. They will always disappoint you, as you demonstrated so well. But it is over now, mortal.”

Courage gasped for air. But she found only blood and love. She did not struggle, but held me tighter, stroking my face with her hand, trying to memorize me, wanting the love more than life. But the shaking of her limbs and the trembling of her lips were slowing down. Her eyes slid toward the Banished One, and fear crept into their calm silver shine.

“Let me go,” she said tenderly, twisting my hair around her finger.

“I cannot,” I moaned. “He’s wrong. He will always be wrong. I’m your sister. We belong together. Who am I without you?”

But she shook her head sadly, her childlike gaze full of memory. “You can’t take me with you.

It’s against the rules of this place,” she whispered softly.

I wept until there could be no more water in me. I held on to her as long as I could, even as I could feel Elomia’s cold blue hands pulling at the depths of me, pulling me back. *No, we can’t part like this. This isn’t the right ending. This story is broken. It ends with everything put right again. It has to.*

But it didn’t. Maybe it never could have.

I felt myself fading away. I felt snow falling through my soul from far off. I was not yet gone, but it already seemed as though I watched my sister’s body and mine from a long distance, flying back toward the sun and the moon and the mountaintop and the two grieving statues in the ice.

**“He’s wrong. He will always be wrong.
I’m your sister. We belong together.
Who am I without you?”**

No. I could not. Not like this.

I laughed. I forced myself. I would give her that. As it had been then, it could be now. Hollow, fractured, but laughter nonetheless. I kissed her nose. The moment broke like a promise. She shivered and shimmered, and then she was a sliver of crystal, sliding easily through my fingers and back onto

the air, the heft of her gone, just a glimmer of silver again, darting and leaping back into the currents of the wind, back toward him, her keeper, running ahead of me again, always ahead, into the pale, ropy cloud-stream and down into the cavern of his waiting fist—

—as whatever of me had moved in the world beyond rushed back through the fabric of reality toward the heat and press of the living, dragged by a blue and frozen hand, I saw beneath me the spinning wastes of the irredeemable land, the endless nothing, the horrid red-gray broken desert of misery.

And wherever we had walked or run or knelt or fought or wept, from the edge of the tower to the end of us, wild white roses and glistening bloodthistle bloomed out of the barren, starving earth in a graceful, curling line like a long, deep river.



And when I woke, the bloodthistle was all that still hung in my heart. Wild, tangled, bright flowers striving against a land that did not want them. But where had I seen such a thing? I could not think. The rest floated into shadows and mist and away, leaving me alone, half-frozen and uncomprehending, leaning against the stone statue of some miserable horned woman, with only the shredded hem of a memory to cling to, growing thinner and more ragged all the time. Why had I come so far? For what? What could be so important that I would abandon the war of my people?

But all my heart answered was a dream-vision of bloodthistle, curling, crimson, eternal.

My numb, frost-blued fingers dragged in the graven letters of the statue's name. I stared at it for a long time before shouldering my pack and heading back down the mountain toward summer and strength and the cause that needed me.

ACCEPTANCE.



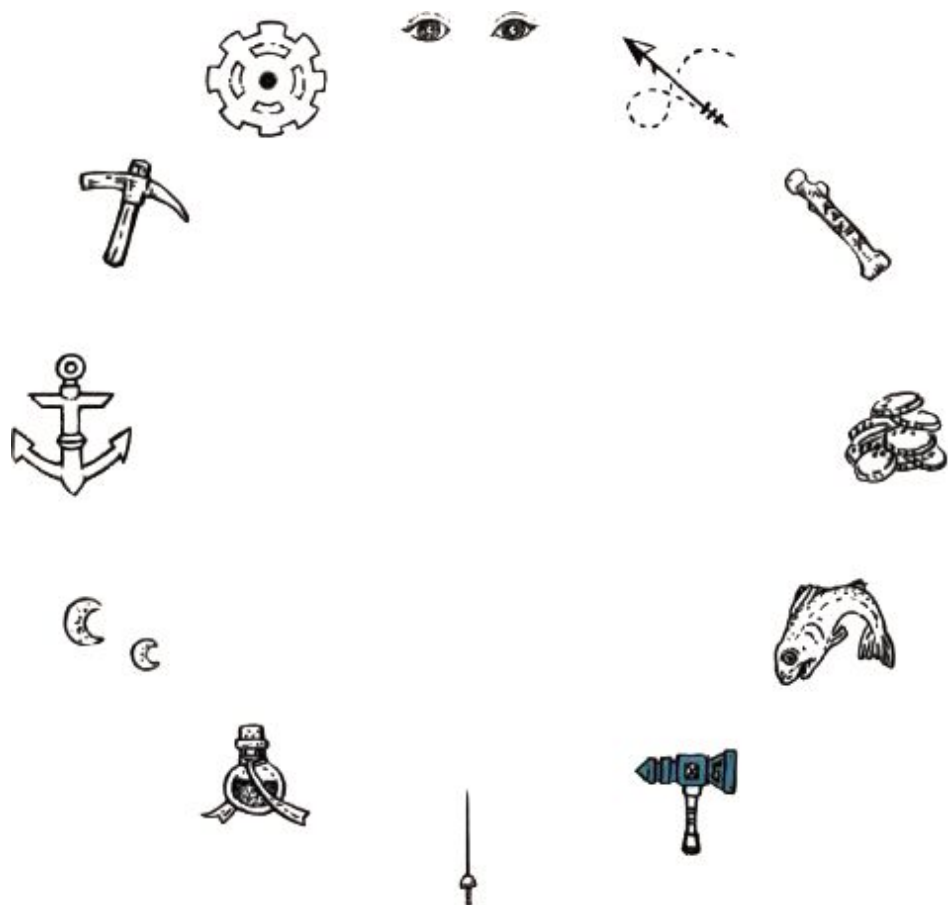
THE PALADIN'S BEAST

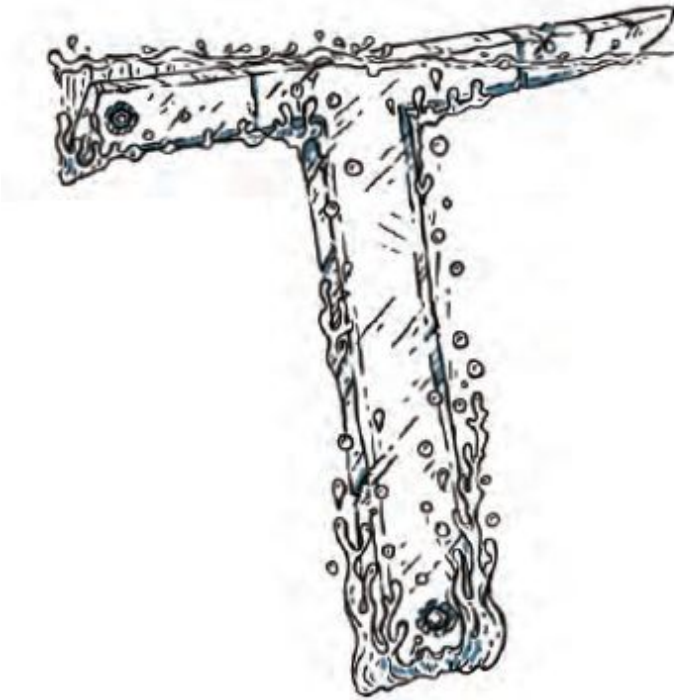
BY MADELEINE ROUX



ILLUSTRATED BY
KONSTANTIN VAVILOV







he old nans and old grans who

sat beside golden beds in the palace of Lordaeron liked this tale best for fussy prinelings and princesses who refused to sleep until one more story was told. It is about forgetting and remembering, and that is what sleep is for—to forget what we think is true and to remember what our heart knows is truest.



The tale begins in Alonsus Chapel, with an ancient archbishop and his most devoted paladins. The bishop called all his best to the courtyard before the chapel and admired how their armor gleamed in the sun as though the Light itself was shining upon them. He told them, “Listen well, champions: our chapel stands tall and sturdy, but the Light challenges us to go beyond our

familiar grounds. It is time for you to prove your resolve as paladins. By great deeds all noble warriors of the Light find their destiny. Journey far, be brave, return when you have proof of your valor.”

These instructions were indeed unclear, but the paladins, being paladins, understood what was required of them. Saidan Dathrohan was there, with his long fair hair and a sword the length of two men. And Turalyon stood beside him, golden in every way, a serious man with a serious face; he was wearing a cloak embroidered with suns. Tirion Fordring, with his excellent beard and tall pauldrons, waited behind his brothers-in-arms with Gavinrad the Dire, black of hair and beard but with kind and thoughtful eyes. Other paladins, too, had mustered in the courtyard to see off their exemplars, but for this tale, we are concerned with Uther.

Uther, a solid timber of a young man with a mane of fiery hair and eyes like a coming storm, stood ready for this challenge. Radiant with the purest love for the Light, he listened to the bishop’s words and nodded with their cadence. *Send me to the ends of Azeroth*, he thought. *I will prove myself again and again, as many times as I must. Forge me in the fires of doubt and fear: I will overcome.* For to train in the Light, to wield it, to become its weapon, was a worthy endeavor, though not an easy one. A soul must be tested—a hundred times, a thousand times—before truly understanding its path.

And now his path took him away from home, north through pastures and hills, through farmlands aglow with summer wheat. He rode with his fellow paladins to the edge of the kingdom, where they would scatter to the winds. Before they parted, Turalyon raised his voice to assuage his brothers’ fears. “Take heart and fear nothing. Trust in the Light, and we will all meet again at Alonsus Chapel, stronger and wiser.”



Uther was not discouraged and only grinned. While they were all men of wit and courage, there existed between them a brotherly rivalry, and such promises were expected. Saidan made his own boasts, and Gavinrad, too, though Tirion rode away without a word to any of them. Uther said only,

“Be safe and well, brothers. I look forward to the day we are reunited. I sense greatness lies ahead.” He did not add, *And great danger.*

When the lands familiar to him fell away, with mountains at his back and forests ahead, Uther took his gallant black horse deeper into the wood. A summer storm came swiftly upon them, a clear sky turning to steel, a few fat drops of rain the only warning before the squall descended. The driving rain pelted tree and stone, and Uther rode blindly, soaked and chilled to the bone. A crack of lightning split the sky wide open, and his mount whickered and shied—then tossed, rearing with a scream onto her hind legs and dumping her rider.

“Forge me in the fires of doubt and fear: I will overcome.”

Uther thrashed, falling not onto wet ground, as he expected, but into a pool of water. He had not seen it there, the pool, yet it pulled him under, deep and strange and scalding. The knight prayed and looked for the way to the surface, but up was down and down up, and he could feel the water rushing into his lungs, choking him. This now was death, boiled and drowned in his own heavy plate armor.

His heart was pounding painfully, and he thought of his brothers and all whom he had failed. For all his devotion, he could not fulfill his Light-given charge. His eyes rolled back, and he went still—but death never came. Instead, he noticed a soft light flickering above him, playing and bouncing along the surface of the water. Uther reached for his last shreds of strength and swam, dragging leaden arms and legs, kicking, pulling, bringing himself at last to the sweet and life-giving air.

When he emerged, choking and gasping, the storm had passed as suddenly as it had come on. A trio of maidens bathed in the pool, a shimmer of frost on the ground all around them, a fringe of grass visible near the stones where the heat of the water had banished the cold. His arrival startled all but one lady, who sat very still and watchful while her companions dove for their blankets and cloaks to cover their nakedness. Uther hurled himself onto a rock, looking all around the pool for a horse that was not there. The woods themselves seemed changed, the trees low to the ground and wearing

burdensome mantles of thick white snow. Every detail felt both surreal and muted.

It was not winter in Lordaeron, but here he could see the coiling white snakes of his breath upon the air.

“Where am I?” he asked the maiden, who sat on a flat stone, dangling her feet in the bubbling water. “What land is this?”

“Are you a wielder of magic, sir, that you can breathe in the water?” the young woman asked instead of answering his question. She was radiantly beautiful, with a long sheet of spun-gold hair that fell over her like a rich mantle. She wore a blazing silver necklace in the shape of a sword, with a gleaming sapphire set in the hilt. “What land are you from?”

Uther furrowed his brow and climbed from the pool, the frosty winter air attacking him as soon as he did. Huddling into his armor, he slicked the water from his face and hair. “From Stratholme, in Lordaeron to the south. And I am no mage, lady, nor can I forgo air in my lungs. I am but a man, a paladin, and a stalwart servant of the Light.” His gaze avoided the two frightened ladies whispering beneath their cloaks to each other. “Please, do not fear me.”

“I do not fear you,” the golden-haired woman said and stood.

Uther averted his eyes at once, though her beauty and her ice-blue eyes enchanted him.

“You came through the pool, so you must be here for a reason. How came you by it?”

“I fell,” Uther answered, still bewildered. Was it magic that had transported him, changing a forest pool into a gateway of unusual power? “A storm tossed me from my horse. I was sent to range far, to test myself in service of the Light, and now I am ... here.”

The maiden laughed at him, then beckoned her companions forward. They brought the young woman a silver cloak, elegantly embroidered with beaded thorns and fur along the collar. “Quests are better performed when warm and dry,” she told him. “Come, join us—the palace is not far.”

Uther thanked the lady for her hospitality, and as they traversed the path through the frozen woods, he gave his name. “You may call me Uther.”

“I am called Miatharas, sometimes Lady Miatharas, or Revered Daughter of King Gilvin Artenes. These are my attendants, though you have given them both a fright. They shall soon recover.”

The lady's cloak trailed along the crisp, frosted grass as she led them to a path winding through the wood. Above the treetops, castle towers—white as the snowy ground and slender as icicles—sat like a crown over the forest.

“Why are you not frightened?” Uther asked.

“Inevitability, I suppose,” Lady Miatharas replied. Her voice was richly melodic and as enrapturing as her fine hair and eyes. “Though, now you have come, and my heart is heavy.”

“Why is your heart heavy, lady? I mean you no distress,” Uther replied sincerely.

“You will want to fight in the tournament—all knights do. Our knights fight and die. Every year they fight and die, but the tournament goes on. I hate it, but as Revered Daughter, I must attend.”

They walked through the wood and came to the palace. It had high walls and a deep moat, and before it, he saw the tournament grounds ringed with dark-blue pennants. He felt warmer at the sight of it—now his purpose was clear. Uther would enter this tournament, and he would win it. The Light must surely be testing his might and his heart.

“Do not be sad, Lady Miatharas,” Uther told her and placed his hand on his armored chest. “I will win the tournament, but I will put no knights to death.”

“Oh, no.” She grasped at her arms as tears fell down her pink-tinged cheeks. “This tournament is like nothing you have encountered before: you will fight a terrible beast.” The maiden parted her cloak and lifted out the silver necklace shaped like a sword, the sapphire on it brilliant as a star in a clear night sky. “No one has ever won this prize because of it, and no one ever will.” A treasure fit for a quest. He would bring it to Alonsus Chapel as proof of his resolve.

“I will win it, lady,” he promised.

She shook her head, forlorn.

“The Light will not fail me—it has never failed me. Your fears are misplaced. Have you ever seen a paladin take to the field of battle?”

“I have not,” answered Lady Miatharas, guiding him past the tournament field, across an ice-slick bridge, and beneath the walls of the palace.

“Then you do not know what I am capable of, what the *Light* is capable of.”

Lady Miatharas let him take her arm, and she sighed. “You will not win,” she said, and that was that.

Uther was received with every desirable courtesy by the court of King Gilvin

Artenes. He was an old and hollow man, though he still had a healthy bloom on his cheeks. His gray hair fell in wisps from his head, crimped beneath a jagged silver crown. Servants filled the tables with basted stag meat and roasted turnips, with sauces and soups, with tankards of honeyed mead, tiny barbs of lavender floating in the foam. The warm hall blazed with blue fires, white wolves prowled the edges of the feasting, and a bard strummed his song. He sang of King Aslin Artenes, who had come before and died of treachery.

*King of winter, just and bold,
Cruelly felled by one so cold.*

The other knights of the tournament were there too, though Uther knew none of their names or deeds and found that strange. *Where am I?* he thought. *What is this place?* But the food and mead bolstered his spirits, and the dry cloak provided by the king kept him from illness, and so he did not think overmuch on the peculiarities of the place. King Artenes and his daughter proved to be generous hosts, and the knights all around him gave escalating accounts of their incredible and somewhat unbelievable feats. A soldier in green and gold had slain a spider the size of a house. A lady knight with flaming red hair had soared atop a mad gryphon before driving it into the sea. An old veteran in bronze and a fair-haired duelist had both conquered drakes, the size of which became a serious topic of debate.

All the while, Uther gazed at Lady Miatharas, though she hardly seemed to notice him. She looked unbearably sad and brightened only momentarily when the bard came to serenade her.

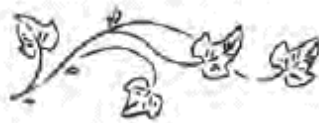
Uther was given a tent to rest in; it was striped red and black and located near the tournament field. He removed his armor and prayed, kneeling on a pile of furs and listening to the wolves howl outside. Before he could climb into bed and close his eyes, a figure appeared in the tent.

“Lady Miatharas!” He leaped to his feet.

“Oh, paladin.” She rushed to him and took his hands. Her fingers were like ice. “Do not enter the tourney. Do not fight. The beast cannot be killed, and to raise your sword against it is to court your doom.”

“The Light will protect me—it always has,” he promised her. “Let it bring you solace now.”

He called upon the Light then, to enfold them both in its warmth and protection. But the glow radiating from his chest frightened her, and Lady Miatharas cried out and ran from him. Uther scolded himself for alarming such a delicate creature and fell into a fitful slumber. If he was careless in this test, he would bring only shame back to Alonsus Chapel.



Gusts of wind rocked the tents and slapped against the high-flying pennants at the tournament the next day. Squires in their knights' colors gathered by the gate, and the people of the strange and frozen land filled the benches with their bodies and their whoops of excitement. Uther had no squire and no horse, but the wrinkled veteran in bronze assured him he would not need them.

Short and broad with spikes bolted to his shield, the old man told him, “Your mount would just be more meat for the beast.”

Uther searched the stands for Lady Miatharas but found her absent. *The fighting must trouble the lady too much*, he decided. *She is frail and seems so full of fear*. He listened to the roar of the crowd as the old knight hefted his shield and entered the grounds, preparing to fight. Uther heard the beast before it came, the wind doubling in strength, wings beating the air before the dragon descended. He had never seen such a creature, breathing white ice fire, its scales pale blue and black, the ground cracking with frost wherever its clawed feet fell.

The veteran cried, “For the memory of our king!” and rushed at the beast and died. The dragon slashed him open from navel to neck and idly tossed his body somewhere into the woods outside the moat. The crowd groaned, and the fearsome lady with red hair pushed past Uther to enter the fight and went quickly to her demise.

A wave of fear and doubt crested powerfully enough to sweep him out to sea, but Uther stood anchored in his faith and determination. These were not unseasoned knights, yet the beast cut down all of them like brittle autumn grass. Soon there were none left except Uther, who stepped over the broken body of the boy in green and gold to confront the beast. Its face was long and slender, its teeth icicles that did not shatter when it crunched them down on bone. A gentle snow began to fall, though under the flat gray sky it looked more like ash.

Where are all your deeds now? What has your valor brought you? wondered Uther as he steadied his stance. The whispered warnings of Lady Miatharas returned to him. *The beast cannot be killed, and to raise your sword against it is to court your doom.*



Trust in the Light, Uther told himself. Trust in wisdom. I am meant to be here. I am meant for this test.

He was a stranger to that place, a stranger to the beast, and a stranger to all the customs of this land, but the lady had given him knowledge. Uther set down his great hammer and knelt, and he felt the deadly cold breath of the beast unfurl around him like a ghostly shroud. It seemed to smell him, and

he felt his hair ruffled by the cleaving wind that hissed from its throat. He looked into the creature's eyes and saw only pain and panic; he looked at the great cracked shackles on its legs and saw the welts from many cutting chains. Perhaps it was not justice, to let the thing live in such suffering. The fallen knights had chosen to fight, but what if this monster had been forced onto the field?

"I will not raise my weapon against you," he said, holding his hand to his chest, feeling the Light swell within him and empathy without him.

The beast reared, and for a moment he thought it prepared to strike him dead. But then it lay down beside him, lower than Uther's heart-pressed hand, and the people in the crowd went silent. The snow fell, the dragon surrendered, and Uther won the tournament. The dragon's once-fierce eyes all at once looked exhausted, and the wretched creature limped away, chains clattering against stone and snow. It felt like something less than victory, to see such suffering. But the test had been passed, and his hand had been stayed. Uther stood and raised his chin high.

King Artenes hoisted an urn above his head and shouted, "Behold, our champion! Uther the Unbloodied!"

The bodies of the other knights were taken away and buried with their standards, and the feasting began again outside the tournament grounds. Music played, buoyant and sweet, all the blood and loss forgotten. Their hearts were fixed on the joyous present, but Uther's thoughts drifted back to the chained dragon. King Artenes promised that Uther would have his trophy soon and praised his remarkable courage.

"If I may inquire, my king, what will become of the beast?" Uther asked.

"You will see," the king said with a snap of his jaw like a corpse stiffening. He turned on his heel and was gone into the crowd.

Suddenly, a handmaiden drew Uther's attention, saying that Lady Miatharas awaited him in her tent. It would be a joy to see her fear swept away, having proven to her the power and guidance of the Light.

Uther found the white tent draped with flowers, though the blue blossoms were already fragrant with rot. Inside, he beheld Lady Miatharas standing in a robe of gray and silver, the clasps intricately wrought with runes. She did not smile as he expected but remained shrouded in sorrow. The bard from the feast played a melancholy tune, reclining on a pile of cushions behind the lady. Uther had not given the singer a second look at

supper, but now he saw that the bard had darting quixotic eyes and a mop of hair that seemed sometimes blue and sometimes black. His face was gaunt, not ugly but severe, the flesh clinging dearly to his bones. Garbed in hose and vest, he stared intently at Uther, while Lady Miatharas drifted forward and bowed her head.

“You have come for your prize,” she said, tears sparkling on her cheeks and in her sheet of golden hair.

“I have come for that, yes, dear lady. But why do you weep?”

The lady shook her head and reached toward him, placing her hand on his armor over his heart. He noticed the bruises on her wrists, deep and new, and saw the blood crusted beneath her fingernails.

The beast, he thought, that I felled with compassion.

“Do not take this jewel from me, paladin. It was a gift from my fated,” she said, looking to her left, where the bard strummed his instrument. Uther followed her gaze and understood. “It is the only thing I cherish in the world, this jewel. Please, paladin, do not insist.”

**He noticed the bruises on her wrists,
deep and new, and saw the blood
crusted beneath her fingernails.**

Uther clasped his hand over hers. “Keep your prize, lady. I will return with empty hands but a full heart. You have shown me the wisdom in compassion, the restful beauty of an unraised weapon. But tell me, how came you to be the beast? Why are you made to fight?”

“I disobeyed my father, the king, and his line is broken because of me. This is my punishment.”

“Unjust!” Uther thundered. “You and your companion must join me—leave behind the unkindness of this place and make a new life in Lordaeron.”

The lady shook her head, her hand still pressed to his heart. “That is forbidden, paladin. My chosen and I are bound to this place—the magic that guards the pool through which you came will not allow us to pass. Only you may wake and return freely. And leave behind this felled creature.” A shiver ran through him, her hand cold against his chest even through his armor. A

flash of light followed, and the suggestion of magic or a rune hovered before him, and then it was gone. "After you pass through the waters, this land and all you did here will be little more than a memory. One day, I think it will mean something more to you, and you will see me and the beast and the castle again with perfect clarity."

Uther turned to go. "When, lady?"

"Many years from now, on a broken field blazing like fire. You will think of me, and I hope the memory will bring you comfort." Her wavering smile vanished, and she clutched the pendant around her neck. "Though I fear it will not."

And so Uther left the tent and trod again the winding path, and he returned to the pool, finding it just as it had been the day before. He waded into the steaming water and felt the magical brand against his chest sizzle and burn. Just as the lady had promised, he passed through the gate and back to forests he recognized and a familiar sky. His horse nosed at the grass not far from the still pool and raised her head, drawn by the sudden splashing and the return of her rider.

As the lady had prophesized, his memory of the tourney grew far off and blurred, like the sun through a heavy fall of snow. Uther rode south in sullen silence and found that he was the first of his paladin brethren to return. Kneeling before the bishop, he confessed that he had nothing to give and nothing to show. He had only a vague stirring in his heart that peace and kindness had guided his hand, but what that hand had been guided to do he could not say. He tried to recall his strange journey, certain that there would be something grand to tell and grief spared, but he faltered and stumbled over his words, helpless.

"My hammer is unbloodied, and my faith is unshaken," he said, showing the bishop the clean weapon. "Yet in my heart I know there was a good deed done."

"Do not concern yourself," the bishop told him kindly. "I know of what mettle you are made, Uther, and it appears we cannot know the test that you passed. The Light shines in you stronger than it did before your journey—that much is clear to me. The proof is your return, and in this pure hammer you show me now with such pride." The bishop frowned then, his brow furrowing. "Yet look here, my son, your armor is cracked. Whatever you

survived, perhaps it has left you with a warning. Now stand and bathe and pray. Light grant you good rest.”

Uther moved his cloak aside and saw that what the bishop said was true. He ran his fingers into the cut on his breastplate, finding that it was cold, as if struck by ice.



This is usually where those old nans and grans would find their charges sleeping deeply and let the story drift to a close. Princlings and princesses would slip through their own transportive pools of dream and wake wiser. But such a story would not end so easily for Sir Uther.

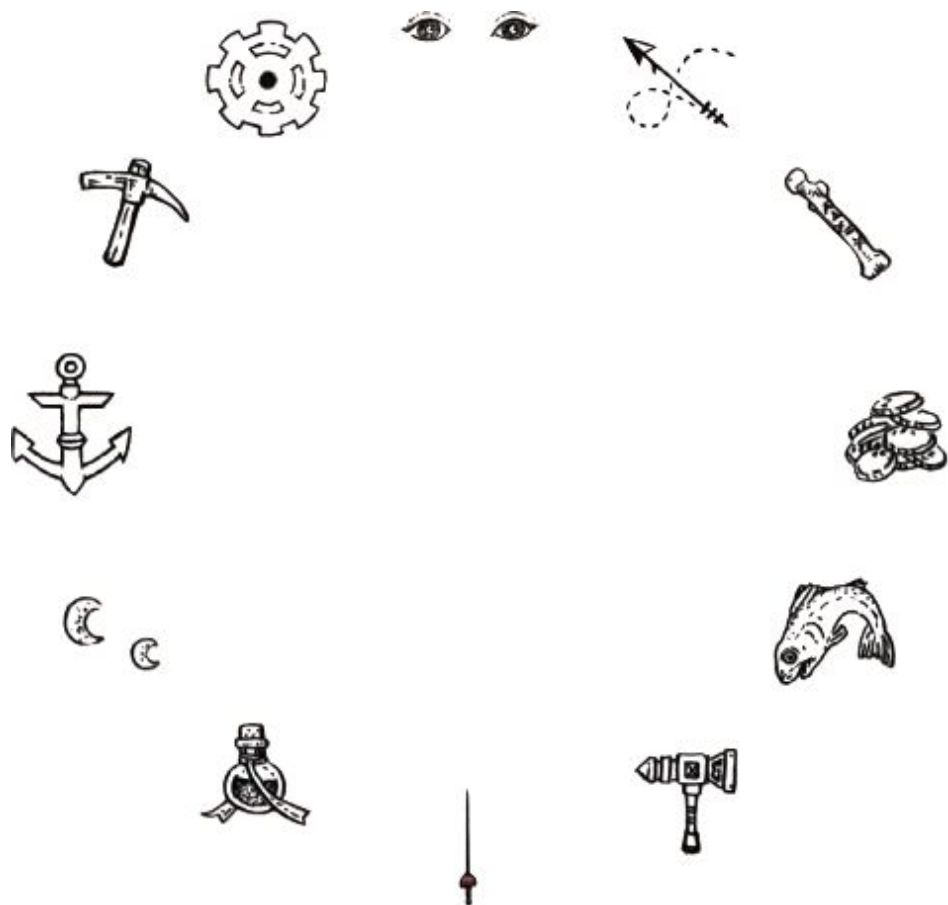
The years passed, and sometimes Uther dreamed of a winter kingdom, a silver sword, and spun-gold hair. He would not remember more until he came to kneel on a bloodied field that was blazing like fire, ash on the wind and truth in his heart. There he saw the beast once more. With waking epiphany, he recalled the lady and her warning, but it would be of no comfort to him as his armor cracked again.

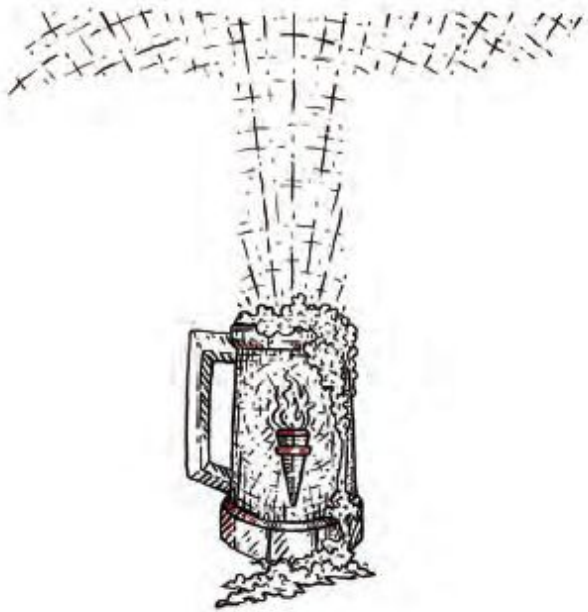
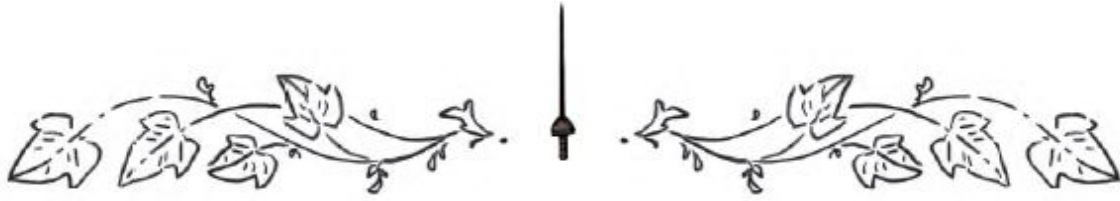


FOR LIES AND LIBERTY

BY E. C. MYERS

ILLUSTRATED BY
ZOLTAN BOROS





hough the new arrivals filing into

the Undercity resembled a funeral procession, they were welcomed joyously, with as much warmth as undead bodies could muster. Many among the incoming group were in varying stages of disorientation and decomposition. Some clung to their burial shrouds like children with their favorite blankets, hoping to wake from the horrible dream they found themselves in. But truth and dreams do not mix well. Even still, the despairing and the aimless were ushered eagerly into their new home beneath the bones of a once-great city, where they would be soothed, celebrated, and gently inducted into the sometimes-unnerving ways of undead life. For each addition to the city's population was a gift, bringing safety and strength to their fledgling kingdom through greater numbers.

On this particular occasion, a couple of veterans, Conor Greystone and Bronwen Polaron, greeted a cluster of six confused foot soldiers, their liquifying vocal cords dripping with kindness: "Let us help you, friends. Come with us."

The foot soldiers followed them readily through the dark, twisty mazes of the old catacombs. Among them was one Jeremiah Pall. Like his brothers-in-arms, legs, and other missing body parts, he wasn't yet familiar with determining his own route and destination. The Lich King's shackles were gradually slipping from his mind, but it was still easier to follow directions from others. His memory was sluggishly making its way back. Fortunately, his new companions had only good intentions, now that they could choose to forgo violence.

"Where are we?" He turned round and round to take in the room. They had emerged into a peaceful alcove decorated with flaking paint and broken cobblestones, isolated from the shuffling of worn-through boots and the scraping of exposed phalanges.

"Home," Conor said. "And a quiet place to make acquaintances."

The group gathered around the crumbling remains of a fallen pillar. Its broken segments formed makeshift benches and seats, and they all sat facing one another.

"How odd," Jeremiah said, wrinkling his nose. "I should smell decay ... but there's nothing."

"You get used to not breathing or smelling. There's not enough flowers down here to miss it anyway," Conor said.

"Everything feels so strange," Jeremiah murmured.

"Be glad you can feel at all," Bronwen replied without malice. "I'm Bronwen Polaron. My associate here is Conor Greystone. What do you call yourself?"

"Jeremiah Pall."

They went around the small circle, speaking their names as free souls in a kind of rechristening, until they came to the last foot soldier. He was not a boy but not yet a man, now forever stuck in between, just as they were all caught between life and death. The youth picked nervously at a split wound on his forearm, pulling the puckered edges of the skin farther apart. Jeremiah looked away. That would take some getting used to as well.

"I am ..." The foot soldier looked perplexed.

They waited patiently as his cracked lips moved silently.

"Go on—it will come back to you," Jeremiah encouraged him.

The boy finally responded in a tone that said he hoped he got the answer right. "Abel?"

It might not have been his birth name in his past life—the group would never know—but one name was as good as another, and the important thing was that what you called yourself was your choice. Still, something about his face—or his voice or his quirked smile—reminded Jeremiah of someone he had served with in life. Someone, but who exactly it was eluded him. The best his useless brain could come up with was the image of a wooden toy boat.

“Welcome, Abel,” Conor said. “Welcome, all of you. If there’s anything you need, anything you want to know, we are your guides.”

“We find that new arrivals settle in better when they share how they came to be here,” Bronwen said. It was important to help the recently raised accept their new fate and cope with the traumatic memories that sometimes rushed back into their reawakened minds.

Jeremiah stared at the back of his hand, marveling at how familiar and yet unfamiliar it was. The skin was ashen, mottled with darker purple spots where his unmoving blood had settled.

“We died,” he said.

“Obviously,” Bronwen replied with gentle jest. “But what led to your death and subsequent rising?”

Jeremiah had been drafted, pressed into the army without any say in the matter. It was the same with most of the others. But he was surprised to hear that Abel’s story was different.

“I enlisted.” Abel continued pulling at the open wound on his arm, stretching the skin like taffy. Jeremiah glimpsed the white of his ulna and winced.

“Why did you volunteer?” Jeremiah asked.

Abel’s glowing eyes twinkled. “To be a hero, like Captain Whitney.”

“Whitney.” If Jeremiah had any breath, he would have drawn it in sharply. Instead he dug his fingers into his legs and leaned forward intently. Something had sparked in his cauliflower brain, hearing that name again after ... How long had it been? A dark recollection bubbled up that had nothing to do with the Lich King. Something uglier. Something with a choking sound.

Abel sat upright and clasped his hands, more animated than he had been since passing through the northern gate. “Captain Whitney, the Fearless

Flyer! My father told me stories of his great victory over a formidable orc battalion.

“Whitney’s forces had been fighting the orcs for weeks. They were low on food and even lower on morale. The wise, courageous captain knew they needed to do something bold, something unexpected, if they hoped to gain an advantage over their tireless foes. That was when Whitney spotted the catapult, and a brilliant idea came to him. What if they could attack from *above*?

“The captain rushed to the catapult, calling his troops to arm themselves. As his weary soldiers rallied around him, Whitney spoke: ‘War demands much from us—often too much. The fight pushes us to our limits, and if it doesn’t break us, it pushes us beyond them—further than we ever imagined possible. Each one of you has done everything that I asked without question, reprieve, or complaint. And so tonight, I ask for one final show of your faith, loyalty, and steely determination. Follow me into this last battle, and by the time the sun crests this field, the day will be won with our enemy fled or fallen at our feet.’



“His soldiers protested that the orcs would spot them first and attack, but their captain reassured them. ‘Look for my sign and go forward to victory. Those orcs will not see it coming. Get ready, brave soldiers. When life calls on us to act, we must *rise* to the occasion.’ Whitney winked and climbed into

the bucket of the catapult fearlessly. He drew his sword, and in one smooth motion, he cut the rope. His men watched, dumbfounded, as the machine launched their intrepid leader into the black sky and he disappeared from view.

“The captain flew silently toward the orcs’ camp, the only sound the air whistling past his ears. Whitney angled his descent toward the largest tent, which belonged to the lead orc bruiser himself. When he reached it, he plunged his sword into the fabric, tearing it asunder as he slid toward solid ground. He seized a nearby torch and set the tent aflame.

“The captain was swift, running from tent to tent with his torch. When his soldiers saw the glow of the fire, they recognized his sign and rushed toward the orc camp, their own weapons raised. The disorganized orcs scrambled to meet the surprise assault, but they were spooked and unprepared. Whitney leveled three orcs with a single sweep of his sword, and his soldiers rejoiced when they saw him alive.

“With their supplies and resolve destroyed, the orc forces were routed. Before sunrise, they had retreated, leaving behind the smoldering remains of their camp. Captain Whitney’s soldiers cheered for him: ‘Fearless Flyer! Fearless Flyer!’”

As Abel finished relating the tale, he found his audience speechless, glassy eyes wide. He misunderstood their silence and shrugged. “Sorry, I got excited. It’s my favorite story. My father’s letter told it better.”

Jeremiah was stunned by what he had just heard. He knew the story was wrong. Twisted. Memory pricked his thoughts again—the choking noise. Before Jeremiah could speak up, Conor cut in. “Not at all. Stories guide our lives and shape our destinies.”

“Captain Whitney’s soldiers cheered for him: ‘Fearless Flyer! Fearless Flyer!’”

“That’s why it’s important to know which stories are true and which are fiction,” Jeremiah said.

“Oh, this one’s true,” Bronwen said.

“What makes you so sure?” Jeremiah asked with a lift of his good eyebrow.

“Because I’ve heard Captain Whitney tell it himself. He’s one of us.”

“He’s *here*?” Abel jumped to his feet. “I’d like to thank him for inspiring me to follow in his footsteps.”

“*Thank* him? Sounds like he’s the reason you died,” Jeremiah muttered. But Abel either did not hear him or graciously chose to ignore the comment.

“You’ll likely find Whitney at the pub,” Conor said. “He usually draws a good crowd late in the day.”

“We can drink in our ... condition?” Abel asked.

“We may not experience the same pleasure from a mug of ale that we did in life, but some habits from life never die,” Conor said.

“I’ll join you, if you don’t mind,” Jeremiah said. “I’d like a word with him as well.”



They found Captain Whitney in the trade quarter, in a makeshift pub just as run-down as its sparse occupants, with rotting wooden beams, sticky floors, and a sickly light that rendered everyone as dim shadows. Perhaps the Forsaken who lingered here preferred it that way, as it masked their own worsening condition. Jeremiah’s eyes widened as if he’d seen a ghost—and in a way, he had.

The larger-than-life (or larger-than-death) man known as the Fearless Flyer was in an advanced state of decay himself. The flesh on the right side of his face had been stripped away, revealing stark bone traversed by the occasional maggot. Dark earth and purple rot clung to his shabby old clothes. But Jeremiah noted thinning patches of white hair on his scalp, evidence that Whitney had led a long life. The table before him was littered with empty mugs. Without understanding how, Jeremiah knew that Whitney was never far from a mug, and the more he emptied, the meaner he got.

“Captain Whitney?” Abel asked, awestruck. “Stories about your heroic victories moved my heart to follow your example.”

Whitney turned his head slowly, neck joints grinding. When he fixed his eyes on Abel, they blazed yellow. His every gesture was heavy and deliberate.

“Is that so?” His voice was hollow, crooked. “Draw up a chair. Buy me a drink and share your story, newcomer.”

Whitney sized up Jeremiah next. His eyes showed a flash of recognition, and then they narrowed to bright slits. The message was clear: *You are not welcome.*

Jeremiah hesitated for a brief moment before he took a chair at the table across from Abel and Whitney anyway. Abel signaled for service, and a Forsaken woman carried over a tray with three mugs. She was comely, in good enough condition to nearly pass for living, and her threadbare patchwork dress was only just starting to become musty. Jeremiah saw that the cups she brought were empty, but Captain Whitney raised his grandly and made a show of toasting Abel before miming taking a deep draft.

“Sir, I joined the Alliance forces because of you,” Abel said.

Captain Whitney nodded slowly, as though he had heard this sort of thing many times before. “Were you a good soldier, lad?”

“Not near as good as you. If I had been, I wouldn’t be here.” Abel pressed a sinewy hand against his still heart. “I was hardly anything, just a foot soldier.”

“Do not mistake death for failure,” Whitney said. “Everything and everyone dies. Only the strongest souls can be awakened from its firm grasp.”

“Thank you,” Abel whispered. “And thank you for emboldening me to fight for my home.”

“It’s what a captain is meant to do. What stories have you heard about me?” Whitney asked Abel.

Much to Jeremiah’s despair, Abel related the Fearless Flyer story to Whitney, just as he had before. Only this time, the captain constantly interrupted to embellish it with more details:

“No, no, no. We fought those orcs for *months*. They only lasted that long because they had steady reinforcements.”

“I had half their camp ablaze before they knew what hit them. Then my men came in to clean up.”

“I killed at least *five* orcs with one blow!”

Jeremiah burned inside. The tall tale of Captain Whitney—who’d been his former commander, he realized—was awakening dormant memories.

More pieces clicked into place, and with each grandiose feat Whitney claimed, Jeremiah's mind cried, *You're wrong. You're wrong. You're wrong.*

Captain Whitney's voice grew stronger and louder as he and Abel went on with the story. More patrons drifted over and settled into the seats around him, a captivated audience—though perhaps some of them felt more like captives, as Jeremiah did. He recognized several old comrades, who also seemed to find the captain's exaggerated claims hard to swallow. But none spoke up.

"The orc bruiser, most people forget about him. Our duel is a story unto itself," Whitney said.



Abel was so far onto the edge of his seat, he was in danger of falling.
“You actually fought him?”

“Oh yes, I beat him single-handedly, though he was three times my size. I caught that coward running away from the battle and leaving his troops behind. So I gave him what all deserters get: the sharp end of a sword. That’s what finally sent the orcs packing. When they saw their leader fall, they

scattered. In fact, I hunted them down. Every last one of them.” Whitney tipped his empty mug back into his gaping, largely toothless mouth. Drinking down *lies*.

“I like you, soldier,” Whitney said, wiping his dry lips. “I could have used more like you in my division.” He gave Jeremiah a cutting look.

Jeremiah yearned to set the record straight. He wanted to tell everyone about the brave soldiers who had died that night because of the captain’s folly—because of his outrageous claims and broken promises and unspeakable cruelty. But the crowd here had also drunk the lies. What little grumbling he heard from the soldiers gathered around was quickly silenced by the captain’s cutting glare.

So that’s still how it is, Jeremiah thought. Indeed, it seemed some habits from life never die.

Whitney had led his men by making them fear him more than their enemy. His temper was abysmal on a good day, and it only grew worse the more heavily he poured his brew. His troops fought hungry only because he withheld rations according to their performance, while his belly was always full. If anyone dared speak out of line, they were punished even more severely. And when Jeremiah’s friend had spoken out against the captain’s cruelty—he knew something painful had followed, but his mind would only think of that little wooden boat. Abel and Jeremiah were the only souls left in the pub after the captain departed, trailed by his quiescent admirers.

“I wish we could do something to honor Captain Whitney, to show him how much we respect him,” Abel said wistfully.

“You bought him a drink,” Jeremiah muttered.

“But he accomplished such great things in life. The whole Undercity should celebrate him.”

“I can’t bear this anymore. You have to know the truth about your so-called hero.” Jeremiah glanced around and lowered his voice, hating himself for being nervous to speak out, even now. “Whitney wasn’t fearless—he was *cruel* and *foolish*.”

He snapped his mouth shut. Could he really speak the truth aloud? He would never forget the days he’d spent locked in a dark box, no larger than a coffin, as punishment for insubordination. It was a reminder that Captain Whitney decided who lived and died, on or off the battlefield. He heard the choking again and Whitney’s slurred voice: *Quiet now. Captain’s orders*.

Jeremiah clenched his jaw. He had already lost *everything* because of the captain. But he wouldn't allow fear to continue to rule him.

"In truth," Jeremiah said, "the captain was stone-drunk the night of the raid, as he was every night. It was dark, and he angrily stumbled into the catapult, got all tangled up in the ropes. And when he stupidly cut himself free, the catapult flung him into the orc's camp." His tone grew harsher as he released pent-up rage. "He smashed into a tent, and it collapsed, then caught fire by accident. The orcs interpreted it as an attack, so they retaliated. Most of us were brutally killed, but—"

Jeremiah shook his head. "We managed to make it into the camp while half the orcs tried to douse the fire. It took easily ten men to take down the orc bruiser. When it was done, his remaining forces ran away. We found Whitney in their camp. He had been hiding like a coward while we fought for our lives. For *his* life." Jeremiah's eyes flared bright with righteous fury. "But truth doesn't win wars, especially when it's ugly and inconvenient. A war hero helps recruit more soldiers, and thus the Fearless Flyer was born."

"His stories are everything to me. The tale of the Fearless Flyer was the last letter my father sent me. Why should I believe you instead of him?" Abel shut his eyes tightly, grinding what was left of his broken teeth.

"Because I have no reputation to protect and nothing to gain by deceiving you."

"You're just jealous of Captain Whitney."

"Not jealous. Angry. And sad." Jeremiah sighed. He understood that Abel didn't want to believe him, because if the captain's legendary attack had been nothing more than an embarrassment, then Abel would have built his life on a false idol—and ultimately lost it. Those stories of valor would putrefy in the dead boy's still heart, along with cherished memories of his father. Jeremiah lifted his empty mug and pretended to take a sip. It was as empty as he felt. He dropped the mug heavily to the table.

"Was your father Roland Meadows?" Jeremiah asked.

"You knew him?" Abel's eyes were wide with shock.

"We were in the same division. He was my friend. You look just like him, you know. He often spoke about his boy. Whitney forced us to sing his praises in any letters back home."

"If you're right, why hasn't anyone exposed him?" Abel demanded.

“Who would listen to a lowly foot soldier over a decorated captain? If we hadn’t promoted Whitney’s version of things, our careers would have been over. Everyone had their own reasons for keeping silent. My family depended on my wages, so I went along with it. I never saw my family again before I died. But the saddest thing about it ...” Jeremiah’s shoulders drooped. “Your father *did* have the courage to speak up. He confronted Whitney, saying he’d put an end to the lies. He was going to chase down the courier, stopping the letters and the falsehoods. Whitney would have none of that—he cut Roland’s throat. Whitney smiled as my friend choked and slipped away.”

“You’re the one lying. My father was happy to serve with Captain Whitney! His letters said so! He’s probably still out there—”

“He talked about a toy boat his son built,” Jeremiah whispered.

Abel fell into a troubled silence. His lower lip trembled. “We were going to race them when he got home.”

The pair sat quietly, processing. Grief did not discriminate between the living and the unliving.

“I don’t know what to think anymore. I had little at home, but I had a hero to look up to. I thought my father admired Captain Whitney. He never came home, but I never knew why.”

“Abel, you joined the army because of your father. You were following in *his* footsteps, not Whitney’s. Your father died for the truth. But that doesn’t have to be in vain.”

Abel put a hand to his cheek, as though expecting tears. He blinked a few times. “I believe you, Jeremiah. So what do we do about the captain? What *can* we do?”

“I hoped you would say that. I often wished I hadn’t supported his lies when I was alive, but it seems I have a second chance to make it right. And you’ve given me an idea of how to do that.”

“What will we need?”

“Mainly? A celebration. And a catapult.”



It didn't take much flattery to coax Captain Whitney to address his fellow Forsaken on the anniversary of his legendary victory. Abel was the key—as the Fearless Flyer's newest and biggest fan, Whitney had no reason to be suspicious of Abel's humble request, and no one questioned that it was the anniversary of that battle against the orcs. (It was not.)

Captain Whitney did, however, balk at the sight of a large catapult, the powerful war machine that had launched him into history. Jeremiah had meticulously recreated every detail on the repaired catapult he'd found in the ruins of Lordaeron.

"This doesn't look safe," Captain Whitney hissed as Abel led him up from the familiar darkness toward broad daylight and the catapult's loading basket.

"It's stable enough. Purely ceremonial," Abel assured him, startled at how readily Whitney believed him. He had never liked lying for any reason, ironically a lesson his father had instilled in him from a young age. But now he had no father to admit his lie to, and he would forever grieve that.

Jeremiah began chanting: "*Fear-less! Fear-less!*" The crowd soon took up the cry with their quavering voices, surging in intensity, echoing through the crooked city streets. Whitney climbed up into the basket and stood tall, soaking in the praise. If he noticed that some of his former soldiers were present in the crowd, it caused him no concern. They had an understanding, a reality Whitney had created—a greater truth held together by the bonds of war.

Or so he thought.

The crowd hushed, and Abel prompted Captain Whitney to begin his tale: "War demands much from us. Often too much. The fight pushes us to our limits—"

Abel handed up a mug to Captain

Whitney. "What's this?" Whitney asked.

"I thought we would reenact the moment, exactly as it happened, so all can see your triumph firsthand," Abel said. "You were drinking that night, before the battle."

"Oh, yes," Captain Whitney said. The crowd shifted uneasily, fabric rustling and bones clacking in chorus. "Hold a moment. Where did you ...?" Whitney looked around. All eyes were on him. "Ah, I just recalled! A soldier kindly offered me some ale, but I told her sternly that courage comes from

within, not from a glass. And I dashed the mug to the ground!” He demonstrated, and the empty mug shattered on the worn cobblestones. Whitney smiled. “Now, where was I?”

“What we believe makes us who we are, for better or for worse.”

“The fight pushes us to our limits,” someone called out.

“Right. The fight pushes us to our limits, and if it doesn’t break us, it pushes us beyond them ...”

And on he went, following the same script he always had. “They will not see it coming. Get ready,” he said. “Look for my sign—”

At that, Jeremiah and his fellow soldiers tossed ropes over and around Captain Whitney.

“What is the meaning of this?” the captain cried out. He flailed about but only managed to wrap himself up more and more in the ropes, effectively trussing himself.

“The way I heard it recently,” Abel said, “your temper got the better of you, and you stumbled drunkenly into the catapult. Got yourself caught in the ropes.”

“Who have you been talking to, boy?” Whitney squinted. “Who’s been speaking out of turn?” His eyes fell on Jeremiah and the other soldiers. “You!”

“Well. Here you are, Captain, tangled up in your own lies at last,” Jeremiah said.

“Release me!”

“Oh, we’ll release you.” Jeremiah grinned toothlessly. “Once everyone hears the real story. Many of us tried before—this boy’s father tried before. Now the truth will come from you or from me—your choice.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Whitney shrieked. “He’s lying!”

“The mark of a good leader is knowing when they’re beat,” Jeremiah said. “Of course, you aren’t a good leader, so I shouldn’t expect you to admit your lies.”

“Give him a chance to do the right thing for once,” Abel said.

Jeremiah nodded, and everyone looked at Captain Whitney expectantly. If they had still breathed, they would have held their breath in anticipation.

“You aren’t going to believe a newcomer over me. Who’s more trustworthy? A failed soldier boy and a coward, or a heroic captain?” The many former soldiers in the audience roared in outrage.

“Look!” Jeremiah pointed to the wisps of white hair on the captain’s peeling scalp. “Whitney died an old man, not in battle like so many of the men who followed him. Why should he fight when he could order us to do it for him? His great victory, the one we are remembering today, wasn’t some brilliant plan of his. It was a drunken accident that cost our side as much as the orcs. More, if you count the steep price of carrying Whitney’s secrets.”

The captain dangled helplessly in his rope cocoon. “No one cares what really happened. It’s ancient history. No matter what story you tell, it ends the same: we’re all dead.”

“Death offers a fresh perspective on life,” Jeremiah said. “All we have here are our memories and the choices that brought us here. What we believe makes us who we are, for better or for worse.”

“I stand by my story,” Whitney grumbled, kicking his legs feebly.

Jeremiah turned back to his comrades. “Abel, it seems the captain is having a hard time remembering the rest of the story.”

“We were just getting to my favorite part of it.” Abel sadly pulled the captain’s sword from its sheath at his side.

“Wait!” Whitney said. “Don’t do this. That’s an order!”

“‘You’ll be all right,’ you used to tell us,” Jeremiah said. “‘Captain’s orders.’ We may have pulled through, but never were we all right. Another lie, the last one we all heard as you sent us to our deaths.”

Jeremiah stood over the abusive captain, his shadow harsh like a coffin lid. “When life calls on us to act, we must *rise* to the occasion.”

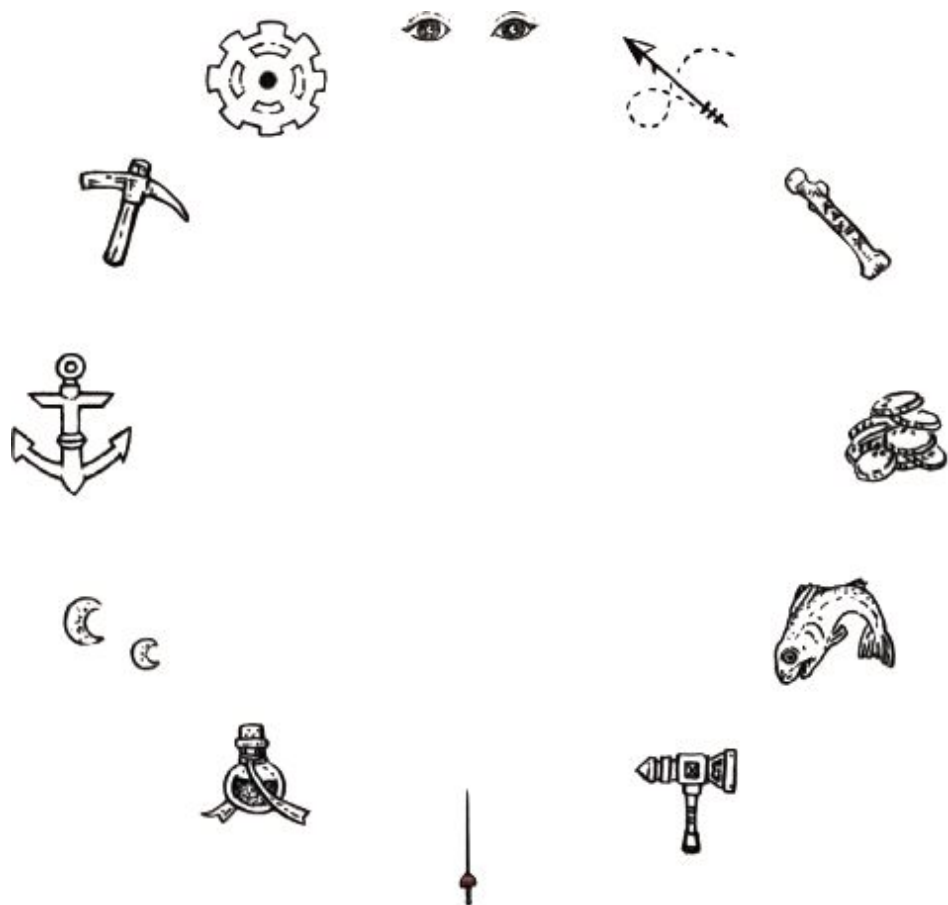
Abel brought the sword down in one sure stroke. The blade sliced through the ropes handily—including the one holding the primed trigger of the catapult.

Jeremiah caught Whitney’s surprised expression just as the arm of the catapult snapped forward, hurling him up and up and up, out of the ruins, far from the city that would stomach his lies no longer. His frightened screams faded into the distance.

Abel gazed solemnly after him for a while, in the direction where the captain, the hero of his favorite stories, had disappeared, likely forever. His body was old and falling apart. He wouldn't survive the landing this time, if all his parts even fell in the same place. But all stories need an ending, as do those who tell them.

"Roland would be proud of you today," Jeremiah said.

Abel lifted his chin and smiled for the first time since his arrival. "You know, I think I'm content being just a foot soldier—like you and my father. Feet firmly on the ground, kept to the honest path."





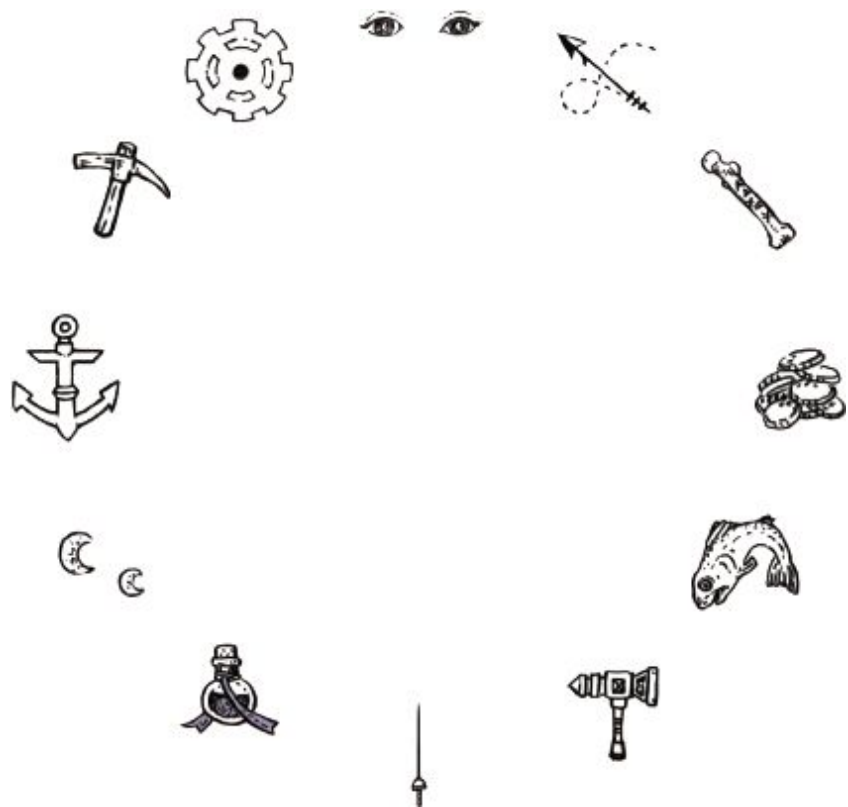
STONES, MOSS, AND TEARS

BY MOLLY KNOX OSTERTAG



ILLUSTRATED BY
ZOLTAN BOROS







ondness filled Elyrion Fogsong's

smile. "I remember when you first appeared at my door, Sentinel Bloomblade. Armored and determined to speak with the mysterious hermit of the bog. You were bold enough then to make the journey down the slopes of Mount Hyjal to my reclusive home and demand a rare antidote for an ailing sister-in-arms, no matter the cost. Does such boldness elude you now?"

"I can be bold on behalf of others," Keda said. She sank into one of Elyrion's musty cushions, hiding her face. "But not for myself. How could I pursue a beautiful heart like Toreth's? I am certain he has no knowledge of my existence."

"You exaggerate," the hermit said, listening to his customer with half an ear as he measured out ground carnelian. The elder night elf was perched at his desk, surrounded by bottles. Light from the cauldron fire played across his lined face.

"Regrettably, no," groaned Keda. "I saw him in the stables today. For all my so-called boldness, when I tried to offer greetings and Elune's blessing, the words stuck in my throat. An onlooking priestess believed I was choking

on something and made quite the display of healing me. I can only hope he politely excused himself from the scene.”

“Well,” mused Elyrion, tapping the powder into his potion, “then it seems he’s aware of your existence now. Surely that is a comfort?”

He dodged the pillow just in time.

“Easy,” he said with a chuckle. “I will charge you double if you make me begin again.”

Keda grumbled, pulling herself up and pacing restlessly around the little cottage. She was tall, even for a night elf, and had to duck to avoid the thicket of herbs hanging from the alchemist’s ceiling.

“You should be happy for my loyal patronage. Most wouldn’t leave the shade of Nordrassil just to acquire potions, and fewer from the mysterious hermit of the bog. Why *do* you live all the way down here?”

Elyrion ignored her question, stirring the potion with a glass rod. It changed from murky gray to a clear blue. “Dear Keda, you know my craft is worth the journey. Here you are, one tonic for stubborn scars.” He raised an eyebrow. “Always buying wares for your sister Sentinels.”

Keda smiled, counting out silver pieces. “They’re all I have in this world. Thank you kindly, Elyrion.”

He corked the potion and handed it to her. “*Ande ’thoras-ethyl*, Keda. Good luck courting Master Toreth.”

She took the potion but hesitated on her way out the door. “Tomorrow night ... the Sentinels are conducting a ceremony. I will be honored with embellishments on my facial markings to commemorate my deeds.”

“Many congratulations,” he said, already scrubbing the cauldron.

“I was wondering if you would like to join us,” Keda said in a rush. “Just for the company? And if you have family in the village, you could bring them, of course.”

Elyrion looked up sharply. Keda had been coming to him for wares and conversation for a long time now—he truly *was* better than any other alchemist in the village—but he rarely made eye contact. She stepped back, for his pale-gold eyes looked almost ... angry? Or scared?

“No, thank you,” he said, and the look faded to his familiar, distracted smile. “Tomorrow night is the full moon, and I must harvest the dewbulbs. And the kaldorei would not wish to be disturbed by the ‘mysterious hermit of the bog.’”

“Of course, my apologies.” Keda bowed her head. “Until we meet again.”



It would have been nice to have someone at the ceremony besides her Sentinel sisters. Close as she was with them, they all had partners and families of their own. Her family had insisted she take up the mantle of druid, as all her ancestors had done before her. But it was not the life for her, and they couldn't see past a broken tradition. They'd never be satisfied with the accomplishments of a Sentinel. She scanned the crowd during the ceremony, just in case, but Elyrion had not come either. Of course he hadn't; she'd invited him to visit her in the village many times, with no success.

Her fellow Sentinels waved and shouted congratulations as Keda returned to the barracks. The embellishment was quite an honor—she'd single-handedly defended a shrine from an elder bog beast and escaped with only a few scrapes—but she had just been doing her duty. Being a good soldier had always been easy for her. Other things, not so much. Like—

“Keda Bloomblade?”

Keda startled, dropped the potion, and dove for it, but it fell through the branches. She scrambled up, trying to make the movement appear dignified. *Why* did she turn into a graceless oaf around Toreth? Elyrion would have another visit from her sooner than she'd thought.

“Was that vial important?” he asked, looking where the bottle had fallen.

“Forgive me,” she said breezily. “I did not realize you knew my name. Blessings of Elune upon you, Lorekeeper.” She felt awkward and ridiculously tall. Toreth Bluestar was small, almost a full head shorter than her, with handsome features, teal skin, and a wild tangle of green hair that Keda would have *very* much liked to run her hands through.

“It is my duty to know the names of every Sentinel,” Toreth explained, looking down at a scroll. “I had a few questions concerning your battle with the bog beast. Is now a good time to discuss the details?” He didn't wait for an answer, swinging around and leading her into the village.

“Is it your duty to ask about our battles?” Keda asked, following him.

“Whenever a deed is particularly noteworthy.” He looked back at her with perfect blue eyes. “An elder bog beast, felled by your hand alone? Impressive.”

“Noteworthy deeds ...,” Keda muttered, thinking.

“Hmm?”

“Just offering a prayer of thanks to Elune,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut in embarrassment. But she opened them hurriedly. It would be just her luck to fall off the mountain in front of Toreth.



“I have a plan,” Keda declared. “I will impress him with unmatched feats of heroism!”

Elyrion raised his eyebrows at her skeptically. “And what will that do?”

“Give him reason to notice me,” Keda explained. “I do not possess any other desirable qualities, but I am a good soldier. Perhaps that will be enough.”

The hermit frowned. “When someone values you for usefulness alone, you will find yourself used. If this Toreth is a good person, you won’t need to perform for him.”

Keda snorted. “Now the alchemist who lives leagues from any other soul has advice on love?”

Elyrion set down his alembic in a huff. “Keda, from all you have told me of your life, you are a remarkable person. Your family saw you as a boy when you were born, but you knew you were female.”

“That’s different,” Keda said. “That’s just who I am.”

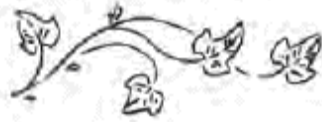
“But becoming who you are took boldness,” Elyrion said. “Now you are a beautiful lady and an honored defender of Nordrassil. Someone who deserves love simply because of who she is. Did your family never teach you that?”

“When someone values you for usefulness alone, you will find yourself used.”

Keda fidgeted with a fraying strap on her armor. “Every man in my family has given himself to druidism. I am neither of those things, but my family could not stomach the broken tradition. According to them, I ended the line of Bloomblade druids, one of the oldest of all kaldorei. Their only child choosing instead to become a Sentinel ...,” she said. “I am alone in the world but for my sisters-in-arms.”

Elyrion blinked, and his face softened. “Well, I suppose there are no lessons about love to be learned from such small-minded folk. But as your wise elder, you should heed *me*.” He corked her potion. “See you soon?”

Keda smiled warmly. “Soon.”



The plan made sense, in theory. Keda got to speak with Toreth whenever she performed some heroic deed that warranted recording. So all she had to do was throw herself into increasingly ridiculous amounts of danger and hope she eventually gained the courage to confess her feelings.

First it was a void hound, escaped from a summoning spell gone wrong. Then a stone giant, which she tracked across the bog and slew in a deep pool, nearly drowning in the process. She collected scars and bruises aplenty, but her conversations with Toreth never went beyond professionalism.

When a marauding band of harpies menaced a little village at the far edges of Hyjal, Keda volunteered to hunt them down, but their numbers were underwhelming for her purposes. “Forgetting” her bow, she made quick work of them using only a long dagger.

“And *why* were you not carrying your bow?” Toreth asked, quill poised above his scroll. Keda blushed.

“I decided I did not need it. Wanted to, ah, test my skill.”

Toreth raised one perfect eyebrow. “And were you satisfied with the result?”

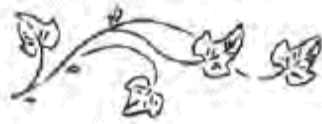
Keda winced. She had a black eye, a healing scrape on her cheekbone, and lingering bruises from the stone giant. “*Satisfied* may not be the right word.”

Toreth blinked and then, to Keda’s surprise, burst into laughter. “Do not let a humble Lorekeeper tell you how to do your job. If it were me, I would stay at home and avoid all mention of harpies, but you Sentinels love your glory.”

“That’s me,” Keda said miserably. Elyrion was right. The way to Toreth’s heart wasn’t through noteworthy deeds.

“Would you care for some tea?” he asked suddenly. “I just finished drying a batch of jasmine blossoms.”

“A kind offer, but I must decline,” she muttered, suddenly consumed by embarrassment and the desire to be anywhere else but there.



“He’s always offering me tea,” Keda said, legs propped against the wall in her favorite thinking pose.

“So gift him some,” Elyrion said impatiently.

“But it would have to be the *right* tea,” Keda said. “A tea that says, *I seek to court you, but if you are not interested, then let us pretend I never mentioned it.*”

“That’s asking a lot of dry leaves,” Elyrion said. He tossed a paper packet into her lap. “Black nutmeg, orange peel, spiceroor. My own recipe.”

“*Shaha lor ’ma*,” Keda said, then sniffed it. “Ooh, it smells lovely.”

“Will you gift it to him?”

Keda grimaced. “I doubt it, sadly.”

“Your lack of confidence is *almost* impressive,” Elyrion said, making Keda squawk in protest. “You remind me of ... hmm. Someone I used to know.” He turned away to scan a wall of potion ingredients. “I wonder if there might be an *alchemical* way to help your problem.”

“Who do I remind you of?” Keda asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“She is long gone,” Elyrion said, and a shadow passed across his face, quickly banished. “Now do not distract me. I am going to brew a potion to give you confidence.”

“Wine?”

Elyrion snorted. “Not quite. Think of it as a potion to let you see yourself with eyes unclouded, to see that you are more than worthy of Master Toreth.”

“That sounds ... rather pleasant,” Keda said.

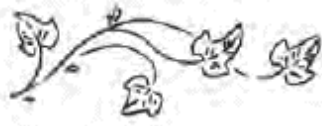
“What’s more, I offer it at no cost,” Elyrion said. “I simply cannot stand to hear you agonizing over this anymore.” He took down a heavy book, dust puffing from its pages. “What do you say?”

Keda mulled it over. It sounded odd, not quite like a real potion. But Elyrion was a master alchemist and knew how to do things that no one else did.

“Very well,” she said at last. “What do you need?”

“I have most of these,” Elyrion said, running a finger down the ingredient list. “But ... ah, I’m missing some. Three crescent stones, two moss bunches, and a nightsaber’s tear.”

Keda grinned. She was good at following a plan.



She found two smooth, gray crescent stones in an antique shop, after an afternoon of searching every leafy corner of Nordrassil. The third she begged from another Sentinel whose wife had a collection of precious stones.

Keda had access to the nightsaber stables, where she found a steed mourning its fallen rider. She gently begged a few tears from it in exchange for a fresh deer carcass and comforting scratches behind the great cat’s ears. For the moss, she climbed all over the tree searching for different kinds. Elyrion had been frustratingly unspecific.

“Goodness, you are thorough,” Elyrion exclaimed when she unloaded several baskets of it before his hearth. He picked the most common variety.

“You only need ordinary moss?” she asked, dubious.

“The most ordinary ingredients contain vast potential,” Elyrion said, laying out his tools while Keda bounced impatiently on the balls of her feet. “I am ... happy for you.”

Keda looked at him quizzically. “You do not sound happy.”

Elyrion paused for just a moment, before grabbing a pestle and turning his back to her. “Of course I am. Of every potion I have made, this is the first one *for you*. And once you see your own worth, nothing will hold you back.”

“You don’t know that,” Keda said.

“I’ve lived a very long time,” Elyrion said. “These things become predictable after the first few thousand years.”

He crossed the cottage and took her hands in his. Keda was surprised at the emotion swimming in his eyes. “But, my dear,” he said. “I feel the need to warn you. Pursuing what you want, and getting it, is a wonderful thing. But it also means you have more to lose.”

Keda blinked. “Can you say it plainer?”

Elyrion dropped her hands. “The greater the joy, the greater the pain of loss,” he said, and turned back to the potion.

Keda frowned. “You tell me to pursue my wishes, then warn me against caring. Which is it?”

Elyrion sighed. “You simply remind me of myself from a very long time ago.”

The cottage was quiet as the potion bubbled. Keda scuffed her boots on the floor, feeling awkward and thoughtless. She had never seriously asked about Elyrion’s past; he’d always been the odd alchemist who lived alone in the bog.

“May I ask about yourself from very long ago?” she said finally.

“It is not much of a tale,” Elyrion said. “I had the life I wanted, and then I lost it. And I am left to wonder if the pain was worth the joy.”

“Is *that* why you live alone down here?” Keda asked. “Surely loss doesn’t mean you never have another chance at happiness.”

Elyrion chuckled bitterly, taking the potion off the fire. It filled the room with a light, piney scent. “Perhaps Elune favors others with greater fortune. But for me? I dare not try again.” He drained the potion through a sieve. “Still! I find purpose in my work. In plants and books and potions.”

He turned to a little table where bottles were set out and tagged, tapping them fondly with his fingers. “This one will help new parents with their baby’s colic. This will bring luck on the wedding day of two young lovers. This one will give a warrior the stamina they need for the long journey home to visit their family.” He nodded to himself. “There is purpose in helping others find happiness, in whatever little ways I can.”

**“I only meant that life is more than
service and glory. There can be
moments of beauty, too, and us lucky
enough to witness them.”**

He poured the potion into a clay cup and offered it to her. Keda took it, swirling the dark, steaming liquid.

“A wise elf told me my value lay beyond my usefulness,” she said. “You may think of yourself as just an alchemist, but I see you as more.” She took a determined swig of the potion. It was hot and tasted clean and sharp, the feeling spreading through her chest. “Just as you see me as more than a Sentinel.”

He smiled, perhaps a bit tremulously, but he looked proud as he patted her arm. “Good luck, Keda.”



The potion wasn't as dramatic as she'd expected. But as she climbed back up Mount Hyjal's slopes, she felt warm and pleased inside. Maybe, just maybe, Elyrion was right about her. Maybe she *was* beautiful (or at least pleasant to look upon), and good company, and a person to be admired for more than her martial prowess. Unfamiliar thoughts, but not unwelcome ones.

“Keda Bloomblade,” Toreth said as Keda marched into his office. “The tomes of your deeds grow fuller by the day. What fearsome beast was felled by your hand this time?”

“None, Lorekeeper” Keda said, settling into her usual chair and holding out the packet of tea leaves. “But I have a gift for you.”



Tea turned into conversation, which turned into plans for another meeting, and another. Long after the potion had worn off, she found herself still feeling bolder. Readier to believe that Toreth might actually *want* to spend time with her.

One night, Toreth asked her to meet him on the roof of the Sentinel barracks, though he wouldn't tell her why. They perched on the cool tiles and shared a bottle of silverwine.

“What are we waiting for?” Keda asked, because Toreth kept peering into the darkness of the undertree.

“You'll see,” he said. “Ah!”

First it was just one glowmoth, gold, fluttering past their faces. Then five, then dozens, a swarm, a cloud shining with blueand-gold light. “The autumnal migration,” Toreth said, lying back on the roof to watch them as they spiraled up into the canopy. “There’s more to life than just battles.”

“So people keep telling me,” Keda said. “Family and such.”

“Not all of us have families,” Toreth said. “I was orphaned very young.”

“I’m sorry,” Keda said quickly. “I—me neither. I mean, they live. But they had their hearts set on a son to carry on our line of druids. But their daughter did not want that life.”

Toreth smiled at her. “Perhaps that is why we understand each other. But I only meant that life is more than service and glory. There can be moments of beauty, too, and us lucky enough to witness them.”

“So I am discovering,” Keda said, but she was only seeing the way the glowmoths reflected in Toreth’s eyes. He brushed his hand against hers. And Keda, even without the potion, knew that meant he wanted to be kissed.



“What made you finally start courting me?” Toreth asked several weeks later, when the kiss had been accepted and returned—and more, besides. They were idling away the morning in the little residence over his office.

“*Finally?*” Keda scrunched her nose. “I thought I was being subtle.”

“Subtlety is not one of your strong traits,” Toreth said, and kissed her on the nose. “Luckily, you have others.”

“Well,” Keda began, “a good friend made me a potion for confidence, brewed from crescent stones, moss, and nightsaber tears. I never would have found the bravery without it.”

Toreth sat back on his heels and gave her a funny look. Keda caught her breath because he was beautiful, and she still could not quite believe that she got to just *look* at him.

“I studied a bit of alchemy,” he said. “All those ingredients are completely useless.”

Keda blinked. “Useless?” She burst into laughter. “Elyrion tricked me.”

“That alchemist who lives in the bog?” Toreth asked. “Elyrion Fogsong?”

Keda nodded, surprised. “You know him?”

“Personally? No. But as Lorekeeper ...” Toreth frowned. “I have heard his story.”



Elyrion answered the door with a smile. “It has been a while, Keda.” He raised his eyebrows when he saw Toreth behind her. “Is this—”

“Toreth Bluestar,” he said, bowing. “Thank you for being such a good friend to Keda.”

Elyrion smiled mischievously.

“Toreth told me about your family,” Keda said at once, and bent and hugged him. “Elyrion, I’m so sorry.” He felt frail and small in her arms and tensed as if affection was unfamiliar. How long since he’d been hugged by anyone? “I have known you for so long now,” she said, pulling back to search his face. “I have told you so much about myself. Why keep this secret?”

“Secrecy bandages the pain. Why would I remove it?” Elyrion said, palegold eyes looking anywhere but at her. “Wife and daughter, lost to a battle I failed to supply with healing salves and antidotes. And me, left with nothing but memories and regrets.” He smiled, a sad smile. “Ellaene was my wife, the finest soul I have ever known. Funny and quick and sweeter than honey to those she loved. And Arietta was our daughter. From the moment we met, you reminded me of her. She was determined to become a Sentinel alongside her mother, and nothing could stop her.” He sighed heavily. “Nothing but death.”



Keda nodded, settling on the pile of cushions beside Toreth and staying quiet.

“I wish I could have seen her destiny unfold,” Elyrion said, shaking his head. “Celebrate her victories, listen to her problems, and give her advice she wouldn’t take.” His eyes glittered in the lantern light. “But that all is gone, forever. I’ve known the greatest joy and lost it in the swiftest stroke. So I stay down here, and I do the thing I’m good at, and I try to help in little ways.”

“You are very helpful, it is true,” Keda said. “But that is not the reason I wish for you to come back to the village with us.”

Elyrion’s face shut like a door. “Foolishness. There is nothing there for me anymore—no friends, no family, no future. I would be as alone as I am in this bog.”

“I have been without a family to return to for years,” Keda said fiercely, and that got Elyrion to turn and look at her. “But at a certain point, seeing you began to feel like coming home.”

Elyrion blinked and suddenly dabbed at his eyes. “Forgive an old elf for being sentimental, but what a remarkably kind thing to say.”

Keda took out a wrapped bundle and offered it to him. It was a gamble, but she was feeling bold these days. “Three crescent stones, two moss bunches, and a nightsaber’s tear.” She winked. “In the hands of a master alchemist, the mixture will help you see yourself as worthy of once again having a family.”

She took his hand in hers, placed it on the ingredients. “I am just one Sentinel, but I have love enough in my heart for a father of my choosing. If he will have me.”

Elyrion looked down, face unreadable. Then he smiled and took the bundle.



THE EMBRACE

BY CHRISTIE GOLDEN

ILLUSTRATED BY
CORY GODBEY





ince the dawn of time, O my dearest, O

my loves, there was the White Lady moon alone in the night sky. Her charge was to keep careful watch over sweet Azeroth and her people during the night, while the mighty, splendid Sun held that duty during the day.

The White Lady loved sweet Azeroth very much and was honored to share such an important task with the Sun. Each night, as the Sun nodded in passing and bade farewell, the magic of twilight settled upon Azeroth. Dusk, like dawn, holds the power of the in-between: not one thing, and not another. And so when twilight comes, it creates a bridge linking day and night, upon which the Lady can walk into the sky from her rest and stand guard over her beloved charge.

And every night without fail, the White Lady moon showed her face to them so that they could see and know that whatever befell them, she was there.

At first, this was enough for the Lady. She raced joyfully to her task, settling in, shining her soft light so that the world was not completely shrouded in darkness. There was fulfilment in routine, in having clear purpose. While the Sun wound down his rays, the Lady eagerly anticipated pushing and pulling the waves of the great oceans and guiding sailors back to shore. When she gazed upon our world, she saw the verdant beauty of the jungles, which pleased her; the vast white expanses of snow, which reflected her light back to her as if to say hello. She marveled over the deep forests and rolling grasslands and the peaceful mountains.

And those who peopled this beautiful sphere: How marvelous they were! *How clever!* she thought as they built their cities; *How sad!* she thought as she watched them war. *How bittersweet,* that they did not live long and their absence was mourned. O my dearest, O my loves, how very much she treasured them and shone her soft, gentle light upon all, great and small.

Empires emerged, thrived, swelled with power, weakened, fell. Countless lives were lived, some rich and full and joyous, some short and cold and cruel. And every night without fail, the White Lady moon showed her face to them so that they could see and know that whatever befell them, she was there.

But while it was a very true love, it was a distant love, separated by space and purpose. The Lady realized that she longed for closeness—someone to love, as those who walked the world she guarded loved. Someone to be with her, not to gaze upon with longing from afar.

“How?” she wondered as her soft feet strode the dusk bridge to her nightly perch. “How would one find such a love?” How many centuries she pondered! Then at last she decided she would ask the stars, for they had many companions.

“Stars, my bright and glittering friends! What do you do to feel love as true as that known by those on sweet Azeroth below?” she asked, her voice as soft and silvery as her face.

And they replied in tones as pure as bells, “We turn to our families, and together we form constellations.”

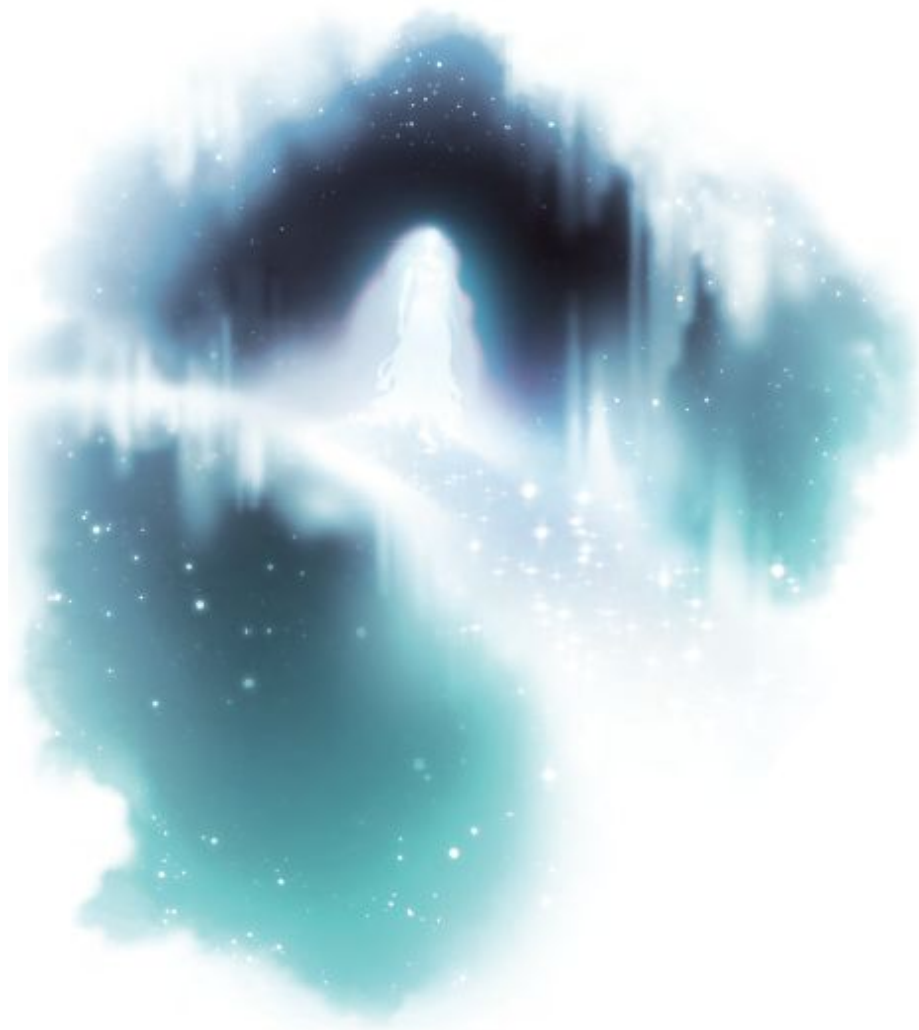
“And what does the mighty Sun do to feel love as true as that known by those I see every night?”

The stars laughed, and their lights winked. “The mighty Sun loves himself well enough. He does not need the love of a family.”

And the White Lady moon realized ... there was no one to be her family. The mortals had one another. So too did the stars. And the Sun needed no one.

“I wish I had not seen such a love,” the Lady said, her voice full of pain. “I wish I had not tasted the desire for it, for now I know such a thing can be. I wish it for myself, and in the wishing, I break my own heart.”

She still trod the dusk bridge and the dawn bridge, but she no longer smiled at the Sun as she passed him. She still shone her pale light upon the world, but she no longer had interest in the comings and goings of its inhabitants. And sweet Azeroth, who might have loved her in such a way, slept on, and would do so for long and long.



Time whirled on, as time does, and the Lady's sorrow grew. Sometimes she turned away for a time, slowly, slowly, then hid her face entirely. But always, slowly, slowly, the Lady moon returned, maintaining her vigil as she had been created to.

Then one day as she looked on the face of sweet Azeroth and those who lived there, she felt a fierce love for them all. Every laugh brightened the world.

Every kind deed mattered. Every living thing was precious, and sweet Azeroth gave of herself to nourish and bless them. This time when the Lady wept, it was with surprise and joy at how very much she, even alone, could love others. And it was then, holding this love inside her, that something wondrous happened. Even the old stories do not tell us how, but we know this much: out of the Lady's love for us, the Child, small and blue and marvelous, came into being.

It is said that this was the most joyous time the cosmos had ever known. The Sun beamed upon Azeroth, taking joy in the Lady's joy. The stars had never gleamed so brightly before, and never would again. It is said that even sweet Azeroth stirred in her deep, deep slumber, sensing the love and smiling. And we hear tales of the tender beauty and harmony of that time even now as something half remembered and wholly longed for.

And oh, how they danced together—mother and daughter, White Lady and Blue Child. It is said that for long and long, the little one ran circles around her mother, laughing and playing. Together, hand in hand, they skipped across the dusk bridge and the dawn bridge that connected day and night, slumbering deeply in each other's arms while the Sun kept watch, and smiling down upon sweet Azeroth's dreaming.

But nothing such as this can stay forever, even if it can stay for long and long. The Child began to question.

"What was I before I was with you?" the Child asked one night.

"You were all I had longed for," the Lady replied, holding her daughter's hand tightly. "You were the tears I wept, the dreams I dreamed, the sighs I breathed, and the hope I held in my loneliest heart."

"And what am I now?" the little one asked of her mother.

"You are the fulfillment of my hopes, the answer to my cries, a blessing so bright I could not even have imagined you to be as you are."

And the Child would laugh—the sweetest, purest, and most perfect sound the cosmos had ever heard—and bury her face in the crook of her mother’s neck and wonder.

The Blue Child began to have more questions for her mother. And these questions, O my dearest, O my loves, weighed on her mother’s heart.

“Lady Mother, those people whom we see each night—are they like us?”

“They are, and yet they are not. They are mortals.”

“What is a mortal?”

“They are here for a time, and then they are not.”

“What happens to them?”

The White Lady did not know the answer to this, and so she gave none. Together in silence, mother and daughter walked the dawn bridge to rest.

The next day, the Child had another question.

“Lady Mother, these mortals whom we see each night—can we descend from above them and meet them ourselves?”

“No, we cannot. We must stay here and watch over sweet Azeroth as she dreams,” her mother replied.

“What does Azeroth dream about?” asked the Child.

The White Lady did not know the answer to this, and again, she stayed silent. And the Blue Child said nothing either.

It was the same on the third night.

“Lady Mother, what was I before I became myself?”

But as she turned to smile at her daughter, she saw only empty sky. The Blue Child was gone.

“Ah,” said the Lady, her heart full. “Now you have asked a question to which I know the answer. You were all I wished for, longed for, and dreamed of. You were the thing I loved best, even before I knew you. Loving you makes me happy.”

The Child looked solemnly at her mother, then asked, in a voice so sad and puzzled and pure that it would make the coldest heart melt, “What do I need ... to make *me* happy?”

O my dearest, O my loves, pity the Lady then, for she did not know her daughter was not happy. Nor did she know what could make the Child so. The Lady was learning a lesson that all mothers must learn: children *grow*.

As she had the first night, and the night after that one, the Lady stayed silent. Except this time, tears fell from her pale, glowing face to land heavily on the surface of the drowsing world below. And as she had the first night, and the night after that one, this night the Child sat quietly at her mother's side, and it was in silence that they walked the dawn bridge back to their rest.

The next evening, the White Lady awoke from her slumber. But as she turned to smile at her daughter, she saw only empty sky.

The Blue Child was gone.

A terrible feeling struck the Lady. She did not know what it was. But she felt as though she were lost, as if she would never laugh again. O my dearest, O my loves, for the first time, the Lady was tasting fear—and grief.

“Where is my daughter!” she cried, her voice sharp as a blade and loud as an earthquake. “Stars, you who shine everywhere, even places I cannot go, where is my Child?”

“We do not see her, White Lady,” the stars answered.

Desperate, the Lady raced across the dusk bridge too early and stood with the confused, mighty Sun. He was so large that he made her feel tiny, and so hot she felt she would be burned away. But still she stood with him, her fear, her grief, and her anger making her turn a dark, smoky crimson. And so it is, O my dearest, O my loves, when the moon turns red, we know she is angry.

“Where is my daughter?” she demanded. “Sun, you who shine so brightly upon sweet Azeroth, where is my Blue Child?”

“I did not see her, White Lady,” the Sun answered.

The Lady, maddened with grief and pain, fell to her knees on the dusk bridge. “Sweet Azeroth,” whispered the Lady, “you whose beings taught me what love might be ... where is my Child?”

But Azeroth drifted and dreamed and did not stir. Like the sun and the stars, she had no answer for the Lady.

Anger is the shadow that trails after fear, and it burned inside the Lady, in her heart of hearts where her love for the Child had once waited to be born. Now the Lady gave herself over to anger and shouted in a mighty

voice, “Hear me now, you cold, glittering stars! Hear me now, you scalding, arrogant Sun! Hear me now, Azeroth, over whom I have watched so faithfully! I will not take up my charge. I will not give my light. I will not pull the tides or slow your days. I will sit and wait with my face turned away, and all you shall have of me are my tears. So it shall be until my Child comes home to me.”

And oh, what a terrible time it was, O my dearest, O my loves. The world sped up, turning faster, till the days buzzed by like bees seeking summer nectar. The tides ceased, and ships could not travel. The water of the oceans crept upon Azeroth until many cities were underwater. The people of Azeroth cried out in fear, and they pleaded for the return of the White Lady.

The Sun, who beheld what was happening, told a star, who told another star, who told a third, until word reached the White Lady moon that the children of Azeroth were suffering.

“Let them suffer,” she cried. “My Child is gone!”

“Perhaps she is lost,” said the stars, “and she will come home if she sees your light shining.”

These words were wise, and the Lady knew them to be so. She rose, smoothed her gown of moonlight, and took her position again in the sky at night. The people of Azeroth rejoiced, and their world returned to what it was before.

So for long and long, O my darlings, O my loves, the White Lady waited at the dusk bridge at the end of every day. She shone luminously in the sky, making of herself a beacon for her wandering Blue Child to find her way home. She was full of hope and love and even patience, for she knew something of this quality.

Time whirled on, as time does. But there was no hint, no glimpse, no whisper or rumor of the Child’s whereabouts. The Lady began to grow fearful again, but instead of turning away from sweet Azeroth and hiding her light, she glowed ever more brightly—becoming not a cool, milk-hued beacon of comfort to a lost child, or a soft, gentle guardian of a dreaming world, but a fierce, ivory sun herself.

She grew larger and larger and moved closer and closer to sweet Azeroth. Her light outshone even that of the Sun. The tides raged, surging higher than ever before as angry beasts devouring the boats that dared sail across their surfaces. There was no rest for those who needed to sleep when

all was ever bright. Travelers could not see the stars, and all was fear and tumult upon the surface of the world.

O my dearest, O my loves, how they raged. How they wept. How they despaired. But one, only one among them, began to sing.

It was not a song from a great monarch or a fierce warrior, but a simple mother grieving for her own child. Hunger was upon the world. Crops burned beneath the constant light. Without food and rest, the mother could not nurse her child; without sleep and nourishment, the babe was near death. This woman, too, raged and wept and despaired. But as the days without nights continued, she instead sang.



*'Pon the surface of the world,
A mother weeps and sighs.
She holds her child close to her,
And watches as she cries.
'Bove the surface of the world,
A mother weeps and grieves.
She wants her child close to her,*

*And oh, she still believes
Her lost Blue Child shall return,
And join her in the skies.
But while you wait for yours, White Lady—
So my child dies.*

The stars were still there, O my dearest, O my loves. And the closest among them heard the mother's song. Their bright hearts were filled with sorrow, and they sang the song to their brethren in the next constellation. One by one, star by star, the song was borne through the cosmos until it reached the White Lady.

She had thought her heart could not hold more pain, but she was wrong. Her beacon, to bring her child home, was harming others who also loved their children. It did not matter that they were mortal and she eternal. It did not matter that there were many children, and there was only one Blue Child. A mother loves, a mother grieves, and no mother who has lost a child would wish it upon another.

"I do not know if you will be able to see me, my Child," the Lady whispered. "But I cannot cause more pain to the children of sweet Azeroth." And so she dimmed her light and retreated. No longer would she usurp the place of the Sun. She would be the soft guardian of the night skies and hope with all her aching heart that the Child would still be able to find her.

Long and long, O my dearest, O my loves, did the Lady wait. The human mother who sang the song taught it to her daughter, and her daughter to hers, and so we remember this time and this song. How many have sung it now? I do not know, nor do the trees, nor the wind. Only the Lady knows.

But one day she saw something in the night sky. Something that had not been there before. Something small and blue and loved.

**She returned to the Lady more than
simply a mother's daughter; she was a
person all her own.**

The Blue Child skipped across the sparkling night sky, smiling wider than she had ever smiled, and leaped to embrace her mother. And all the

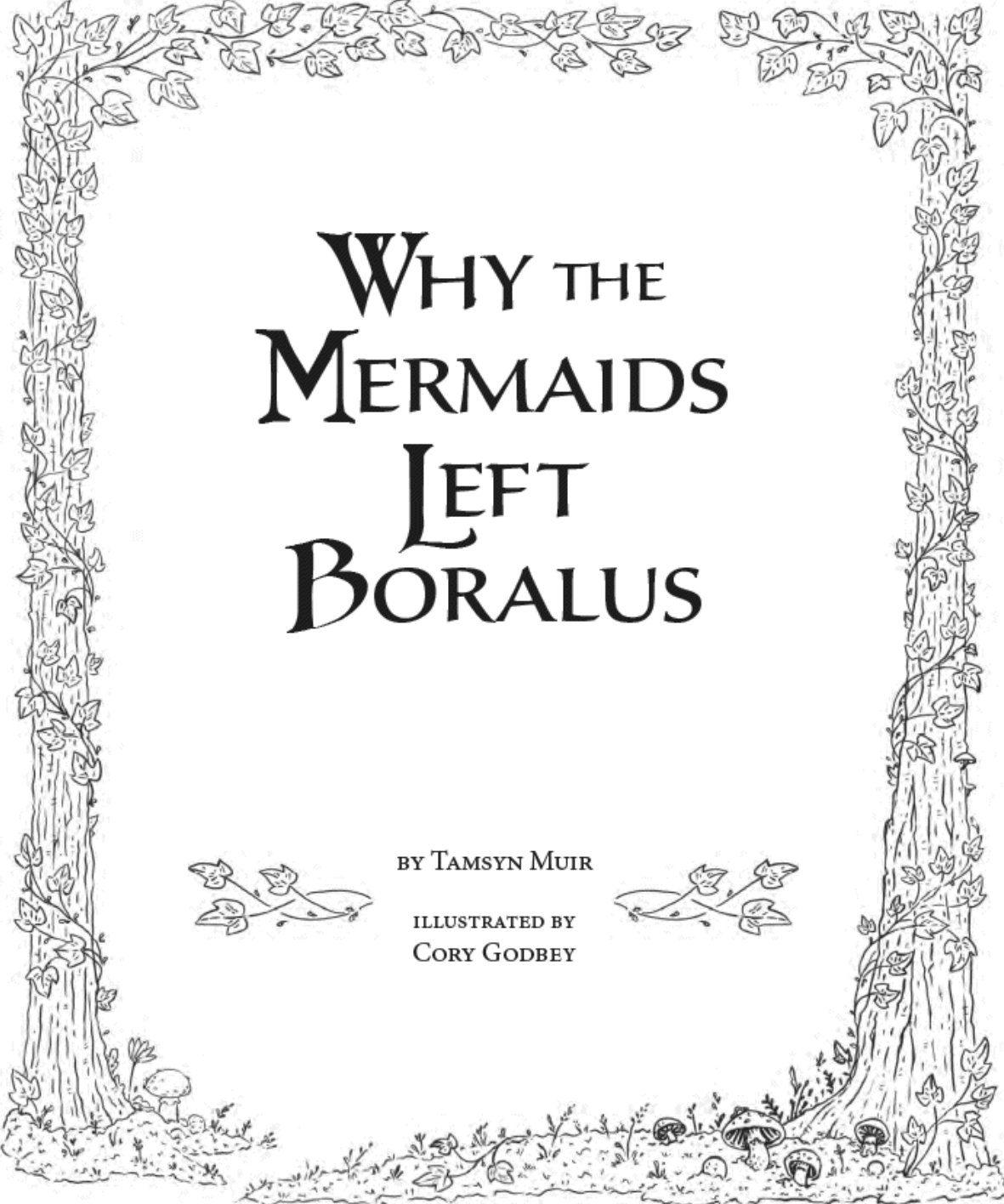
inhabitants of Azeroth slowed their steps and turned their faces upward to behold the wonderous sight. There had been much love seen in the world and the skies before, and there has been much after. But there has never been a joy greater than the return of the Blue Child to her mother's empty, aching arms. How the Lady blazed! How the Child clung to her! Their combined light stretched across the sky like the love connecting all parents and children.

And for long and long, the Child stayed near to her mother. She spoke of travels, of speaking with distant stars, dancing with other moons and suns, traveling to worlds upon worlds. She had even watched sweet Azeroth, studying the children of our world. As she learned the stories of these people, the Lady again heard in her heart the song of the frightened human mother. And the Lady wept, yet again, beside herself for channeling her anguish into harming others.

As she listened with her whole being, in awe of her wonderful child, so brave and full of curiosity, the Lady was at last able to let go of the ache her grief had brought her. For now she saw that by venturing forth alone, the Blue Child had grown wise, as all children must grow. She returned to the Lady more than simply a mother's daughter; she was a person all her own.

Even as she listened and rejoiced in her daughter's presence, the Lady knew the Child would again grow restless one day and again leave her side. But now the Lady also knew her child would always return when she was ready. And so the Lady let her beloved daughter leave when that restlessness began to surface, bidding her farewell with a smile full of love.

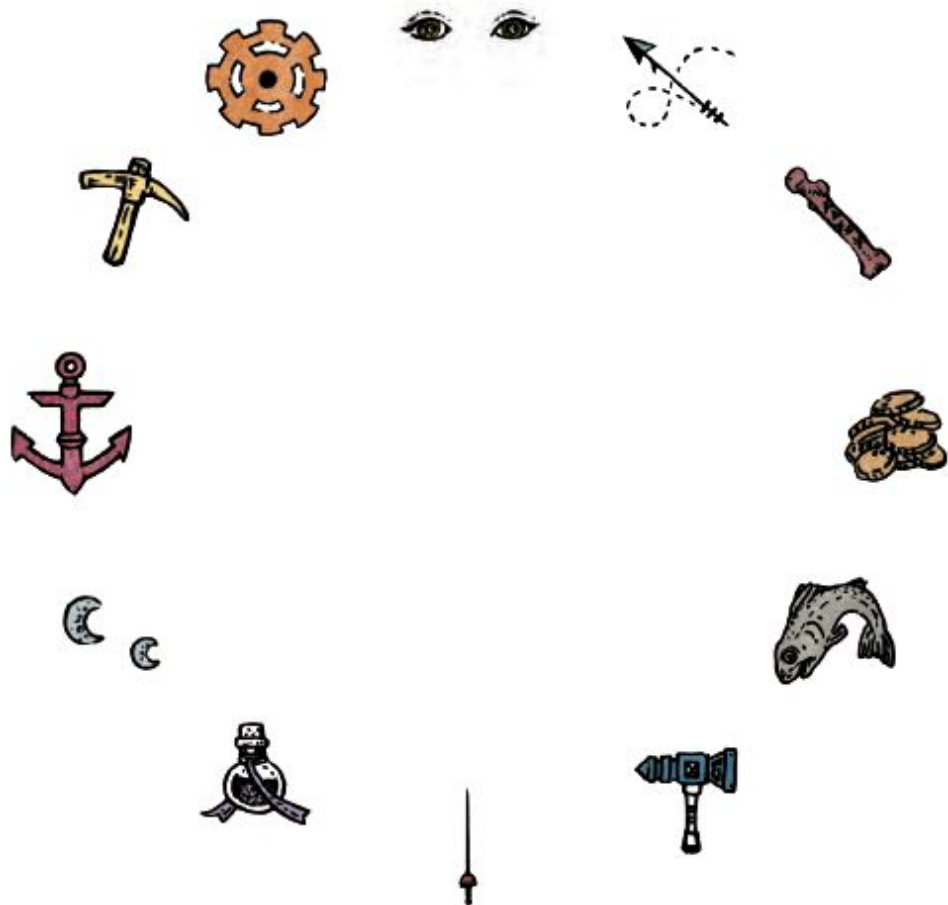
And so it is, O my dearest, O my loves, that most of us will never see the White Lady embrace her Blue Child ... because like those of us on sweet Azeroth, the Blue Child is full of wonder and yearns for adventure. But when they reunite, the sky is luminous with their joy. And while the Child is away, her mother, every night, stands shining with benevolence upon us, lighting our paths and our own children's paths for safe travels.

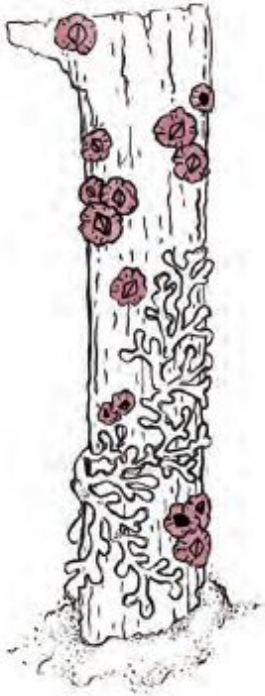


WHY THE MERMAIDS LEFT BORALUS

BY TAMSYN MUIR

ILLUSTRATED BY
CORY GODBEY





n the oldest days of Boralus, the spit at the mouth of

the river led out into very deep sea with nothing to protect it, and even the narrows were many fathoms deep, indeed so deep at their center that a lead plummet would fall forever, with no length of rope long enough to sound the strait. This was back when “Boralus” was so new that almost nobody even thought of themselves as “Kul Tiran,” and when the old folk talked of “home” it was understood they were still thinking of the peninsula.

Rocky Boralus was just that—a rock, with little to protect its houses from the wind and waves. Its citizens counted themselves fishers and shipwrights and sailors and pearl-divers, people who spent more hours on water than between walls, and none of them lived easy lives. Yes, the broad escarpments of Tiragarde sheltered it from the south, and the gales from the Frozen Sea were softened by the time they rolled over the green range to its north. To its west even the most fragile skiff could find protected anchorage in the bight: the inward delta where all three islands huddled like men with

their backs to the wind. The cruelty was in the east, where the Great Sea ruled unchallenged, all the way to Baradin Bay.

In its best moods the Great Sea was tender and even, the blue of steel, only softer. In its worst it lashed out against Boralus like a drunkard wanting a fight: violent, capricious, and colored so deeply blue as to look like a bruise. No murmur of the Tidemother could reach anyone's ears when the Great Sea was in a frenzy. The rocks upon which Boralus was built could withstand this treatment, but the houses could not. Each passing storm sent huts, ships, and racks down to the bottom of the harbor together and dashed men, women, and children to death on the rocks, or pulled them down to accompany the ships. Each passing year produced at least one storm that threatened to wipe the rocks clean of Boralus for good, and in the morning they said the drowned bodies bobbed so thick in the harbor that the living would just cover them with weighted nets and sink them down to the seafloor.

Of course, a seawall would have saved them when the Tidemother could not. But the dark-blue waters between the spit were so deep that tossing in a thousand rocks each day for a thousand years would have done nothing, and the work of repairing the mounding wall after a storm would claim as many lives as it saved. The people of Boralus reckoned that if they were to live, it would have to be by their wits and bravery alone. This is how it is and was for Kul Tiras: the Light rewards conviction, but the ocean demands activity.

So the sailors who lived in hard Boralus back then were so stout of heart and so quick of mind that they would be right to laugh nowadays at our bragging navvies and marines. On a fair day, it was wonderful to see the long ships go into the harbor with their bright flags flying and the pilots rowing to guide them out and in. And it was a terrible sight during a storm, when on land all the people could do was watch the unfortunate boats breaking up before they ever made it past the spit, all the while shoring up their own walls as the waters rose, only hoping that the men and women on the water drowned quickly. For on the sea and on the shore, when a storm hit Boralus, nobody was safe but the mermaids.

Mermaids lived openly near Boralus then. They made their homes in deep caves along the coastline, deeper still than any cable had ever reached, beyond any mortal woman or man's ability to dive. Some pearldivers said they had seen their houses, and claimed they looked like palaces or temples,

piled high with treasure from scuttled ships. The people of Boralus, like most people who are fearless and hardened to disaster, had no guile and loved to believe in these tales. They had all seen the mermaids and knew they were as real as sirens or murlocs; they had humanlike arms and heads and bodies, except that their hands had webs between the fingers like a seabird's feet, and their bodies, not having legs, ended in a fish's tail. They had beautiful faces and long curly hair, and that skin and that hair were tinted all the shades found in seaweed and coral. Mermaids were not too shy to sit on the rocks and watch the ships, which was how most of Boralus had seen them. And it was reliable knowledge that the worst storms were always presaged by the sight of mermaids clinging to the rocks, and the worst winters came when they were seen on the crackling plates of sea ice outside the harbor, plaiting their long hair.

Fishing went badly if the fishers glimpsed a mermaid in the water, and soon sailors began to say that just seeing one in the harbor meant the weather would turn. This made it simple to believe that mermaids brought the storms—rather than simply portending them—and that a mermaid sighted on the first day of a voyage doomed the entire journey to failure. The sailors swore blind that they had seen mermaids lifting rocks from the seafloor to scuttle ships where there had been no rocks before, or becalming the waters or making them choppy, whichever one the sailors hadn't wanted at the time. And then the whole of Boralus talked of luckless women, bringing home the day's catch, dragged down into the deep by things that looked like girls; or of men in pilot boats coming alone and friendless back to the harbor, overturned in the dark by green-haired mermaids who laughed to watch them drown.

Each mermaid had been allotted a certain amount of the Mother's power from birth, and the moment that power got used up the mermaid went—*pop*—*like* a bubble and died.

The sea priests were meant to warn against these superstitions, and they did, but only to a point. Back then the monastery across from the harbor was nothing more than huts and a cloister for the tidesages to live in. Without the tidesages, of course, very few ships would have made the crossing at all. Each ship from Boralus that wanted to go in and out of the harbor carried a sea priest if the sailors wanted their journey to end anywhere above the water. Many sea priests followed their vessels straight down to the salt arms of the Tidemother in extremity, as they were the first to board and the last to disembark. And Boralus's harbor was the grave for many pious men and women who, determined to save as many as possible, kept the waters from dragging sailors down with their perishing vessel. In those days, those who walked the stormy path often walked it beginning to end when they were still young, and for all that the sea priests were dearly beloved, fathers still wept when their children heard the whispers and were sent to the sages in the valley.

Perhaps it was because they rarely made it to a wise old age that sea priests did not warn the people off superstition as they should have done, and often did not chide a sailor for tossing rocks off the bow at the flash of a mermaid's tail. Certainly none of them could have imagined that, far from laughing, at least one mermaid wept when she watched them drown.

Halia was this mermaid, full-grown from the egg, who lived in a deep-sea cave decorated not with the spoils of sunken ships but with the prettiest shark bones picked clean by crabs. Mermaids did live in the dim and forgotten buildings and temples of those long since gone from Kul Tiras—or those thankfully prevented from returning—but they favored wreaths and hangings of brightly colored kelp, and their only wealth was pearls, which they considered little better than pebbles. Mermaids had no idea of the ire they had gained from sailors and were hurt by their attacks, if they knew of them at all. They clung to the long rocks before a storm in order to hunt huge boils of fish coming into the harbor for safety, and they knew to sit on sea ice only when it was frozen solid and could bear their weight. It was true that mermaids had great power over the rocks and the water, but they did not like to use it lightly. Each mermaid had been allotted a certain amount of the Mother's power from birth, and the moment that power got used up the mermaid went—*pop!*—like a bubble and died. Therefore, mermaids, being naturally selfish, did not make mages of themselves. A thrifty mermaid

might live five hundred years, but once she passed there would be no trace of her.

Unfortunately, it was also true that mermaids often halved a fisherman's catch, since they shared the same ground for catching in and were ignorant or contemptuous of the fishers. And it was true that mermaids, from foolishness, had sent some to their deaths—but rarely from malice. Mermaids were not sirens and did not seek to enthrall humans: they considered sirens lazy and murlocs deplorable.

Halia was regarded as flighty and rather stupid by her sisters (who numbered in the dozens), and very pretty, but not enough to remedy her flaws. She was their youngest sister, and this is often the lot of the baby. She had beautiful scales like coral, and her curls were the deep dead green of algae, the kind that is nearly blue from growing so far away from the light. Her besetting sin was a love of watching the ships go by; she thrilled to see their flags fluttering in the eastern wind. She could watch these for hours and had done so from when Boralus was first built. And though young, she knew enough, and heard enough, to be deeply grieved by the sailors' ill regard.

Her sisters said she was a fool and a child to keep playing in the wakes of those ships, knowing the sailors hated her, to which she said, "Ah, but I must watch over them that live on Boralus, for their lives are so hard and their legs so ungainly. Who knows when I could help them?"

When the sailors swore at her and cast their lanterns into the water after her, and her sisters argued with her twice as much, she said, "I must be even more watchful and help them if I can. For now I know they don't like me, and it will be better in the end if I can help them and will mean more."

“Kill fish out of hunger, and kill pirates to defend yourselves,” she said, “but I won’t suffer you to kill a mermaid out of chickenheartedness.”

Then her sisters cursed her for a martyr as well as a fool. This did not stop her following the ships, and in her foolish love of bright things and

beauty she made her favorite the two-master *Windward*, which had some of the brightest flags of all, with the most daredevil of sailor boys and girls for a crew, and its sea priest was the tidesage Ery. And Halia adored Ery.

Ery was loved very deeply by the people of Boralus, and not simply because she had vouchsafed *Windward* and its cargo over many journeys, from the peninsular kingdoms and much farther beyond. They loved her because they loved bravery and quickness, and Ery was as quick and brave as any Boralus could boast of. The sun had burned her brown, and the duty made her mouth unsmiling, and she was pensive and thoughtful in her ways. She thought unflaggingly of duty, which made the *Windward*'s captain and bosun fond of her, but she was no haughty scholar or conceited of her status: she had been born on Boralus in a gutter's hut. How lovely Halia thought her, in her vestments, hoodless, with her strange brown hair the color of the mainmast itself! Halia loved to watch it flutter in the sea breeze, so lustrous and unlikely in hue, and she naively let herself follow quite close in the boat's wake, the better to look at Ery's lovely hair and mourn her poor ponderous legs.

The sailors were beside themselves each time they saw her head break the water and begged the captain to let them scare her off, or even kill her. But Ery would have none of it.

"Kill fish out of hunger, and kill pirates to defend yourselves," she said, "but I won't suffer you to kill a mermaid out of chickenheartedness."

And because Ery was as much respected as she was admired, the sailors were ashamed and forced to let Halia be.



How Halia loved to swim alongside the *Windward* as it left the harbor on sunny days with the gulls crying. She watched anxiously when it was due back in Boralus, and she was so delighted at its return that she left her hair half-combed. And just as Ery asked for the Tidemother's blessings or thanked her for those given, she never failed to give the mermaid a salute when the *Windward* arrived or bid her a solemn goodbye when the *Windward* left. If new men and women on board tried to jeer at their tidesage for making a mascot out of an accursed mermaid, they soon learned not to, for as well as being popular with the crew, Ery had hard fists. In the old days of Boralus the tidesages were not above a sharp blow to the irreverent, and Ery was not too devout to issue them.

When the *Windward* was anchored in the deep blue Boralus Harbor, giddy and grateful Halia would ply Ery with her choicest gifts. When Ery tied up her long brown hair and plunged into the harbor for her morning swim, she would come back to her clothes to find dainty parcels of kelp-wrapped fish or eels, so fresh as to not even be all the way dead, or fresh

clams wrapped the same way, kept damp and alive by means of clever knots in the seaweed to make it watertight. When the fishing was poor Halia could offer only pearls, and so Ery found handfuls of tiny seed pearls in such a rainbow of colors as humans have never seen, or enormous white pearls that could have graced the crowns of queens in Lordaeron. Because Ery was as sensible as she was serious, she dumped this impossible wealth back into the water weeds, and Halia grew to assume that humans thought as little of pearls as mermaids did. This is why there is so much bubble seaweed in Boralus Harbor: it is all of Halia's discarded pearls.

Halia was still too shy to ever address herself to the human woman, but in observing her Halia grew more familiar with her ways than she had when the tidesage was only a wonderful figure on the deck of the *Windward*—more familiar, though she did not know this, than was anyone else with Ery's ways and moods, for Ery did not seek company in anything other than prayer, and though widely respected, she was held in awe more than she was sought for festivity. Halia had unthinkingly disrupted her loneliness. Halia thought nothing of this, but only how much she liked to watch Ery's strong-armed stroke cutting through the water, and to admire how she swam like a dolphin despite the piteous drawback of those long brown legs, and to long to see her smile. Halia, in her hundred years' youth, laughed easily, but how old sometimes did Ery seem!

And indeed at first Ery was solemn over the mermaid's offerings, and then she was touched by them, and then over a long while she was amused by them in her own way, being slow to humor. She spent a whole voyage wondering how to return a gift to the fair mermaid—for Ery, though a human, was not too austere to admire Halia's lovely face and form, nor her profusion of kelp-green curls, nor even her coral-colored tail—and she thought she would seem a churl not to give a gift in return. She spent that voyage sharpening Halia a cunning little gut-hook knife, as Boralus women suffered from an excess of practicality, and on returning to the harbor walked into the shallows and called for the mermaid.

**“Don’t you know that if you waited
until dawn and slit your poor feet from**

**the toes to the heels until the water
turned red with your blood, then
walked into the harbor, that the Mother
would take pity on you?”**

This was their first real meeting, with the tidesage standing waist-deep in the clear green waters of the harbor, and with the mermaid approaching, too shy to look Ery directly in the eyes. She was forced to take Ery's hand when the tidesage pressed the knife into it, and if Halia's lips could not be eloquent her eyes were. In that moment they both found each other enchanting. Halia was thrilled and knew only joy; Ery was grave and deeply moved.

When they had kissed, and confirmed the other felt likewise, and called each other by name and said tender things to each other, Halia said to Ery, “Say you'll stay with me and live with me for always in the harbor!”

“Even a tidesage cannot live underwater,” said Ery.

Halia laughed at her beloved's ignorance and said, “Don't you know that if you waited until dawn and slit your poor feet from the toes to the heels until the water turned red with your blood, then walked into the harbor, that the Mother would take pity on you? She would make your legs fall off and make a tail grow there instead so that you could become a mermaid and live with me. Take the pretty knife you just gave me and do it.”

Ery shook her head.

“In another life I would, but not this one. I have walked the path and pledged what I am to the Tidemother, and ships cannot move through firth or fjord without me. There are not enough tidesages that I could throw off my duty and live with you, Halia.”

“Then live with me anyhow, and I will forgive you the legs,” said Halia, who was growing increasingly desperate. “Let me swim beside your ship when you leave harbor, and make yourself a house by the shore, and if you cannot keep house for me then I will keep yours. And if anyone else asks you to be their sweetheart, you can say ‘No’ and point at me.”

Ery grew more serious than ever, for she did not bandy around much with dissembling or untruth, but she said, “I must never tell anyone of my

love for you, Halia, or they'll never take me willingly on the *Windward* again, and it will be the death of them."

At this Halia cried, as mermaids cry very easily. Ery did not, as tidesages grudge tears just as much. But Halia loved Boralus and loved the *Windward*, and thinking of all the pretty ships and the jaunty *Windward* as so much old wood at the bottom of the sea, she was hard-pressed, so she agreed that their love must be a secret.

From that time on, mermaid and sea priest met in quiet coves and waterways, and as they kept their troth they became more dear to the other. But Ery's resolve, though it wavered, held fast, and although Halia sometimes thought her heart would break, she steeled herself and did not stoop to beg Ery to cut those feet and join her down in the deep waters of the harbor. And whenever Ery joined the *Windward* and set sail, Halia did not join her, but pined for her until her sisters were quite alarmed.

The *Windward* was in dock when the great storm came to Boralus. Boralus was usually in good readiness for storms, being wise to their signs, but this one crept upon them like a murderer. It lashed at them of an evening and did not abate in the morning. Other ships limped into the little port, and the waters rose. The people in the town spent all day in the wind and the rain shoring up the groaning floodwalls. By the third and fourth days the storm was even worse, and the Kul Tirans were collapsing to drown in the standing water, and the ships were dashing themselves to pieces on the rocks with their crews trapped inside them.

Ery and a bedraggled handful of other tidesages were present; there was no way to fill their numbers from the little monastery, and no entry from the swollen south. Back then a journey on foot into the sound would have been equally as dangerous as sailing in, and during a storm most of the paths would have been underwater. Knowing there was no hope of reinforcements, Ery set herself and the others at the river's mouth in nothing more than little skiffs and dinghies, to try to divert the rising water. There being no seawall, they were forced to do its work themselves: to cut the waves and shatter their power before they reached much farther into the harbor and to redirect the tempestuous sea itself back into the pitiless ocean. Behind them the people of Boralus were sucked down into the waves, and the ships were tossed as though they were fishermen's coracles. But Ery and the others could do

nothing but hear the shouts and screams, knowing that a moment's faltering would see the town swept clean like a flagstone.

In all this the mermaid Halia had not been idle. She minded her lover's advice and did not stay close to her, but tried to help men and women who had fallen in and could still be saved; she longed to use some of her magic to shore up the crumbling edges of the town but was too afraid. She was also afraid of someone spotting her and of getting blamed for such a hideous storm, and she was equally afraid of straying too far away from Ery. On the fifth day of the storm many of the other tidesages had faltered, exhausted or broken, but Ery grimly hung on like a limpet, until she was alone.

When she was left by herself and night fell, Halia swam to her and begged her to slit open her feet and save herself from the storm, or at least to rest, but Ery would have none of either. "There's a chance yet," she said. "The storm will be at its peak tonight, but it is breaking half the spit into the water. Behold that wave coming toward us! If it gets through me, all is lost. If I can seal the harbor's mouth now, I will. If I die, I would as lief leave Boralus behind me."

"If you die, I die," said Halia. "I will help you."

For Halia knew, looking on Ery, that to save Ery's life she would easily incur the Tidemother's wrath, and it did not seem as though the Tidemother could show her fury more plainly than she was showing it now. So when Ery stood in the rocking skiff and with one mighty blow parted the boiling gray waters, Halia held the water back from the other side, so between them they ripped the seas in twain, as though they had each grasped the edge of a piece of linen. At the harbor mouth a wall of water churned and clawed, stupefying those fatigued townsfolk still fighting the storm in Boralus, but between the mermaid and the sea priest the ocean found no purchase.

Halia was delighted, but Ery stood in the skiff and called, "Beloved, it is not yet done."

Halia said courageously, "If you hold the water, I will raise a wall."

Then Halia the mermaid was the one who churned the mud and stone up from the seabed and attacked the crumbling chunks of what cliff-face had fallen into the water, trying to mingle sandstone and chalk with hardest basalt. It was a brave intention, and a crest of the Tidemother's magic swept through the harbor like lightning. Halia did not know it then, but it made

each and every one of her sisters, huddled in their homes and drowsing to the far-off sounds of the storm, jolt awake.

A brave intention, but so difficult in execution! Even as Halia built the rocks, they would not stay together or were battered apart by the thundering waves into drifts of shrapnel that cut her skin and scales to pieces. In a welter of terror, she poured more and more of herself into the work—the very life that coursed within her—without heed for her own existence. She thought only of Ery, standing above in a little boat, with that little boat now mostly in pieces, kept together only by the pressure of tidesage magic. She thought of brave little Boralus, too, clinging to the rock, and the ships going down in the harbor. She poured so much of her life into the wall that she had to stop, frightened of how tired she was, pausing only every so often to break upward through the waves and check on her lover and see if they could stop. But Ery would only say, “It is not yet done.”

She slipped into the cold, turbid waters like a corpse, straight down to the bottom of the harbor.

Neither Halia nor Ery gave way, or faltered very much, in the wake of a losing battle. Halia’s horrified sisters were the first to break through the storm of rubble that Halia was creating and shout at her to stop, or to rest at least; when she did neither, they did not know what to do.

It was not that they were not frightened of the storm, or sorry for Boralus, but they had never conceived of one of their own paying any kind of price for it. To see their foolish little sister half-dead from her selfless rigors made them angry and guilty. When they saw the wall gnashing upward from the seabed, they threw themselves into her labor and withheld nothing—for mermaids are passionate and do nothing by halves. Halia’s wall surged and seethed with shell and rock and mud, and the crumbled wood and steel from ships that had already sunk to the bottom of the harbor, and the bones of the dead sailors themselves. More and more mermaids emerged from their bolt-holes and temples and threw themselves into the

wall without misgiving, and soon they were building upward—upward—upward—until the wall had nearly broken the crest of the waves.

Ery, knowing nothing of this yet, fought alone. She was standing in the wreck of her ship, endlessly pulling back on the waves as though she were tugging a rope. Here her human fellows joined her at last; beating bravely through the current came *Windward*, which had risked not only the storm but the fresh danger of the mermaids, darting visibly to and fro amid huge boils of water, stone, and mud. The sailors were scared almost more of the mermaids than they were of the rock fragments that were embedding themselves in the *Windward's* hull; to them it seemed like the end of the world.



Ery's skiff was destroyed by then, and to the sailors of the *Windward* she appeared to be standing on the water as though it were solid stone. They had gathered up the half-drowned sailors and now sought to rescue their tidesage, shouting at her to board and save herself. No matter what they said, she would not come to them. They stood shivering in awe to watch her, and to watch a great and terrible wall being built beneath her feet, until she was

standing on solid stone and rising with it. They also stood shivering in fear to watch the mermaids surface, then dive, all around her and this wall, and to see one in particular return over and over by her side, though she was weak and beaten bloody by tearing wind, water, and rock. Watch was all the *Windward* crew could do—watch and keep calling for Ery. The great seawall towered higher and higher, until it was high as the *Windward's* prow, then high again as its mast, with Ery standing fearlessly atop it. And as the wall grew, some of the oldest mermaids, totally spent, fell lifeless as they worked. They rose to the surface of the water, became a sizzle of bubbles, and were gone. The other mermaids did not falter. The sailors were sicker with sorrow now, and their cries for Ery were now often cries for the mermaids to take pity on themselves and stop. Stop they did, but only when the wall was so tall that it cast a great shadow down upon the *Windward*, and when Ery was a figure high above the crow's nest and the topsail, and when the only figure moving in the surface of the water was a single mermaid—one who kept calling to Ery, over and over, as they did, asking her if the work was yet done. When Ery finally turned around, as though to answer, she fell, as spent as the dead mermaids bubbling on the foam.

She fell down the whole length of that wall to a terrible cry from the *Windward*. She slipped into the cold, turbid waters like a corpse, straight down to the bottom of the harbor.

The sailors on the *Windward* watched as the last lone mermaid dived down after her, and they watched as the waves hammered into the wall without Ery to hold them back, and they watched that wall hold steady against them. They could cheer at that, at least, but their cheers died as they watched the mermaid struggle back to the surface with their tidesage, who was not moving, or breathing either. The *Windward* sailors put out their dinghy and hauled the mermaid—yes, the mermaid!—and Ery back to the deck of the *Windward* with frantic working at the davit and the falls. There the other tidesages worked on her, and the sailors too, and cleared great gouts of seawater from Ery's lungs. But she would not breathe for them.

Almost nobody protested when the mermaid, sprawled on the deck, drew a little pearl-handled knife; those who did protest were held back by their fellows. She struggled with Ery's shoes and hacked at them, and then she slit open the soles of Ery's very feet. Then she dragged the motionless woman with her, struggling along on the deck with her great bright tail, covered in

blood and scales and mud, and it was frightful. The mermaid kept crying, “The harbor! The harbor!” and the sailors, with the great bravery of pity, pushed both women over the railing. Ery and the mermaid tumbled down into the dark water and disappeared.

Only then did the hard-bitten sailors of the *Windward* weep, for the love of the tidesage who had been their devoted friend and helper. They wept too for the dead, the dead mermaids and sailors alike, who had given them and Boralus their lives. They waited but saw nothing, and they cried bitterly. The captain had just given the order to trim the sails and prepare to turn about when they saw a dark head break the water. The hair now had a strange sheen, but the eyes were open, and the face was Ery’s. In place of strong legs, a tail shimmered beneath the surface of the sea. The sailors’ pity had been great, but greater still was the Mother’s. Halia’s arms were around Ery’s neck, and she wept and laughed alternately, for joy.



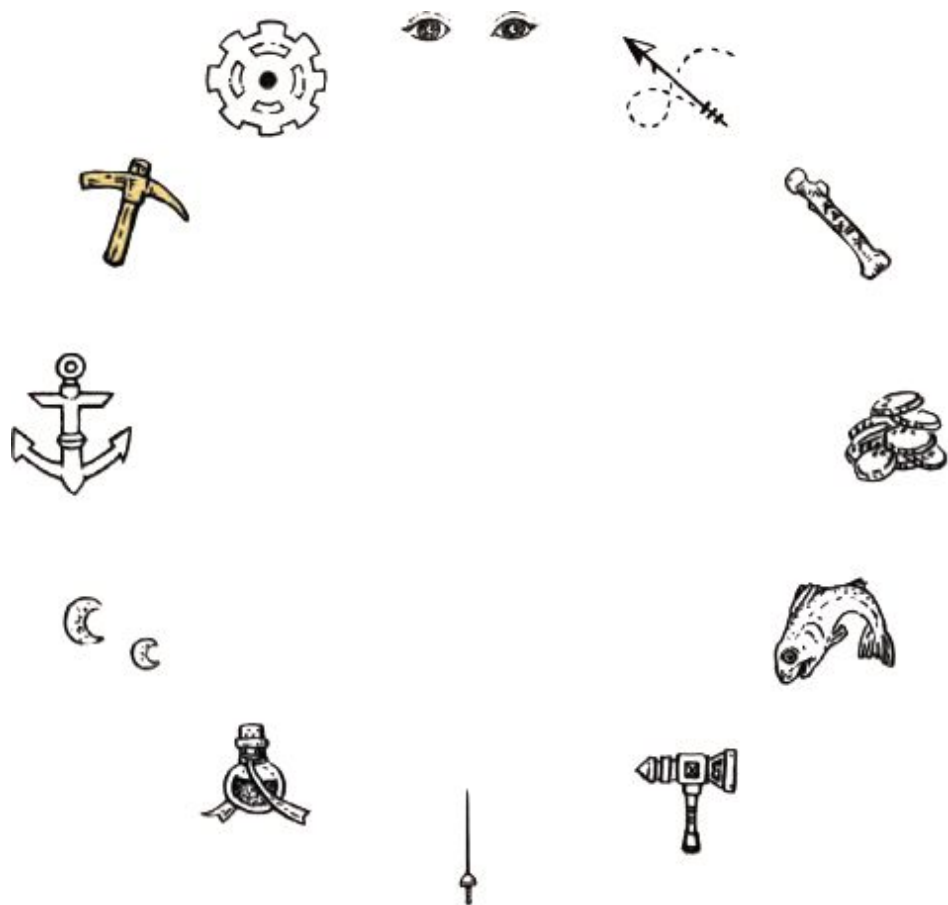
All of Kul Tiras now knows Ery’s story, even if she never returned to them again as a priest of the sea and a fellow in arms. As long as the mighty seawall of Boralus has stood, its people now swear on mermaids as symbols of highest honor and good luck, and as symbols of sacrifice, too, for no mermaids were ever seen again within that harbor. On certain calm sunsets when the red is deeply reflected on the surface of the harbor, old sailors call it Ery’s blood, which presages good weather; in remembrance of the dutiful tidesage and the mermaid who loved her so faithfully.



THE COURAGEOUS KOBOLD AND THE WICKLESS CANDLE

BY ALLISON IRONS

ILLUSTRATED BY
LINDSEY BURCAR





n the way deep down of twisting and turning mines, it was a

bright kobold's turn to tell the sleep-time story. Twig Whiskersnoot found a candle bigger than her arms could reach around and lit its oiled wick. With a strike of her flint, light bounced about the rough-hewn stone walls of her burrow. If there was one thing every kobold dreaded, it was darkness and terrified Twig was no exception.

Comforted by the warm candlelight, Twig flopped herself down on a small pillow of moss beside her hunched grandmother and awaited her audience. The other tenderfoots scampered down from their parents' dens and cuddled up to one another, chittering in anticipation. The most eager of the bunch, the tiny Tallow Whiskersnoot, practically sat on Twig's foot to get the closest seat. He was wearing his best necklace—which was strung tight with his favorite rocks—just for the occasion. Meanwhile, Granny Whiskersnoot nestled beside her granddaughter, grooming an unruly puff of

fur on Twig's head. "You sure this story is the one you want to share?" she asked gently, fussing her granddaughter's ragamuffin fluff back into shape.

"Yes, yes!" Twig replied, bobbing her head with excitement. "It me favorite story! Everyone will love it." She lowered her ears a bit, sinking into her shoulders. "As long as Granny no mind. This Granny's story, and me want to share."

"This Twig's story now." Granny smiled approvingly before coughing hard into her apron. Twig rubbed her back, eyes soft. Despite her age and dwindling health, Granny always made the journey from her cozy nest down to the common cave to spend time with her granddaughter, even when her paws ached with cold and she had to lean on her pickax for the voyage back. The least Twig could do was show everyone how remarkable Granny was.

When twitching ears and flicking tails finally settled down, Twig smirked at her captive audience and began to tell her tale.

Many long time ago, Whiskersnoot kobold tunnels crumbled, keeping us all in the deepest dark. Not safe to go higher, decided long ago. Lived in bottomless tunnels all our lives and our parents' lives and their parents' lives, we have. By wax and wick, we dig and dig and sit and sit. What a bore! Me say there is something better out there. And it's true: there is.

Granny Whiskersnoot was doing as we kobolds do, picking the shiny from the rock and minding the candle. She followed the saying, as all Whiskersnoot do: "Never pick above your snout." But Granny brave, and Granny curious. She pick a little bit above snout, day after day.

After long time, Granny began to wonder if anything up there at all, but then she felt dust falling on her. Above Granny's head was a crack in the rock—and a light! She stood on the wee tips of her toes, and what did she see? A candle. But not just any candle. This candle burned bright and bright, but it needed no wick! This candle could stay lit forever and never snuff out. Granny left to lead other Whiskersnoot kobolds to the Wickless Candle but could never find it again. But she always remember its help. And she tell Twig. And now Twig tell you!

Granny clapped her frail, thin paws as Twig took a dramatic bow. The rest of the tenderfoots were rapt at the wondrous tale. A candle that needed no wick? What other wonders might they behold by digging upward? They clambered on top of one another, asking Twig and Granny for more stories about the Wickless Candle. But Twig's perpetually unhappy papa, head of

the Whiskersnoot clan, interrupted the sleep-time story and folded his mucky paws firmly across his chest. The youngsters all pinned their ears back, Twig included, as if to block the scolding words from entering.

“Twig forget rest of Whiskersnoot saying: ‘Never pick above your snout, else the darkness snuff you out!’ Twig tell dangerous story. Old, old Whiskersnoot pick above snout and lost mines! Trap generations down here many long time. Nothing good come from up above.”

“It’s okay, Papa Whiskersnoot,” one of the bolder younglings piped up. “We know it’s just story. Not real—no, not real.”

Twig felt like her tail had been trampled. She *knew* the story was true. Granny had told her so! But as she looked around the group—whose curious eyes had glittered like gemstones just moments ago—they now shook their heads. “Just a story,” some echoed. “Not real—no, not real.”

“Good. Now, sleep time, all of you,” Papa Whiskersnoot said with a huff. The tenderfoots followed him back to their warrens, avoiding Twig’s disappointed eyes.

“Me sorry, Twig.” Granny sighed sadly, and the sigh turned into a hoarse wheeze. “Kobolds don’t trust what lies beyond their noses. Fearful, skittish. You told story well. Maybe in time, they believe too.” Granny stood wearily and rested her weight against her pickax. “Me heart know Wickless Candle out there, and me heart is with Twig.” She lovingly patted Twig’s shoulder and shuffled her way to bed.

As Granny departed, Tallow tiptoed up beside her and tugged on Twig’s sleeve. “Me believe in the Wickless Candle.”

Twig crouched to meet Tallow’s eyes and found no lie there. “You do?”

“Me do!” Tallow nodded with a large grin and a cartoonish bobble of his head. The string of shiny rocks around his neck jingled playfully as he spoke. “Me want adventure! Excitement! Like Twig do!”

Feeling a little less terrible, Twig stayed up late with Tallow. They whispered to each other about all the adventures they’d go on someday. Talk of perilous exploits and derring-do and the Wickless Candle turned soon to dreams as Twig’s eyes grew heavy and tired. She didn’t even remember falling asleep.

When she woke, there was no sign of Tallow. A single note lay beside her:

GOING TO FIND WICKLESS CANDLE! PICK ABOVE SNOUT! BACK SOON!
—TALLOW

Just then, the ceiling of the cave began to tremble, dropping stalactites like spears. Twig fled her burrow, watching as kobolds dove for cover, crying and trembling. A group of the most weathered miners had gathered at the mouth of a cavern. Rocks and shrapnel tumbled from the shadows, punctuated by grinding metal and splintering wood.

“Cave-in! Cave-in!” one cried, fastening his candled helmet tightly over his head. “Get tools! Get candles! Get help!”

Twig lit her own candle as fast as she could and rushed into the fray. As she helped the miners shove roots and shovels to brace the tunnel, something on the ground caught her eye: a strand of shiny rocks, tangled amid the rubble. The quaking died down as she cradled the necklace in her paws, trembling.

“Has anyone seen Tallow?” Papa Whiskersnoot asked, taking stock of the kobolds present. With a moment of hesitation, Twig limply held out the necklace.

“Tallow leave note. Tallow go to find Wickless Candle.” Twig’s ears drooped as she grasped the necklace tightly. “We need start digging. Tallow could be trapped! Need save him!”

The miners’ faces all fell. “Not safe to dig,” one said. “Mine just braced. May give out again. Cave-in bad, Twig. Tallow’s candle snuffed out.”



The kobolds hung their waxy heads, some bobbing mournfully in agreement. Some had already fallen to their knees, weeping about the darkness consuming poor little Tallow. Papa Whiskersnoot curled his paws into fists and ground his crooked teeth. He leaned in closer, and Twig's courage bent beneath the volume of his voice. "Me warn story was dangerous! Me told Twig no good come from looking to murky myths. And now, Tallow snuffed! Darkness take him because he believe stupid story!"

“Never pick above your snout, else the darkness snuff you out.”

Visions of Tallow being swallowed whole by inky blackness sent cold blood streaming through Twig’s veins. She stamped her feet, though she was shaking. “Many reason cave-in could come down. We waste time not looking for Tallow!”

“Darkness take more kobold if we dig above snout! We lost one today—lose no more.” Papa Whiskersnoot caught Twig’s ear between his chipped claws and pinched. “Especially not to a no-such-thing Wickless Candle!”

Twig’s eyes watered as she ground her teeth, surveying the cowering group before her. They were content to sit in the dirt and give up. “You all just too scaredy! I scaredy, but I still want help Tallow!”

“Then darkness snuff you out too.” Papa Whiskersnoot turned on his calloused heel, ending the argument, and helped the miners seal off the ruined tunnel.

From the back of the gathered crowd, Granny frowned at Papa. She started to hoist her pickax, but she fell into a coughing fit and tumbled to the ground. Twig ran to steady her, letting Granny lean against her arm for support.

“If me weren’t so old and sick ...” Granny cursed, then looked to Twig knowingly. She gave her a single nod and pressed the fallen pickax into Twig’s paws. “Twig knows there is more to kobold life than tunnels. Twig right to be brave and look for lost little Tallow. His candle still lit; me sure of it. Take me pickax, sweet Twig. Wickless Candle gave me light in me darkness: now you must be Tallow’s. Go, before Papa try to stop you.”

Twig’s heart felt so full. She threw her arms around her grandmother and thanked her. After fixing her candle atop her chestnut head and pocketing Tallow’s string of rocks, Twig threw the pickax over her shoulder and quietly scampered off into the tunnels.

With one mine already collapsed, she’d need to be especially careful. Twig picked her way through the serpentine tunnels, listening for signs of life. Careful not to disturb large rocks or sleeping cave spiders, she padded her way up in elevation alongside the ruined passageway. If she wasn’t cautious, she could easily snuff out her own candle—darkness, hunger,

panic, or all three would consume her. Ahead of her, the tunnel was dim and growing dimmer. The only light she'd have going forward was from the one candle atop her head. Fear started its work early, prickling down Twig's neck.

"I'm scaredy," Twig said aloud to no one. "But Tallow need me." When she found just the right spot, she carefully positioned her pickax against a crack in the dull gray stone. The mine Tallow was trapped in should be just behind it. Her papa's words buzzed mercilessly in her mind like a swarm of angry spelunker bees: "Never pick above your snout, else the darkness snuff you out."

She pulled Granny's pickax back and swung.

Bit by bit, rock came free from the tight alcove. With sustained effort, Twig chipped enough away to squeeze into the ruined tunnel. Her candle flickered across the mangled walls but illuminated only stones. No Tallow, not yet. For hours she waded through stone and dirt, up and up the tunnel, cutting in footholds as she went. If she was right, Tallow had made it very far indeed; otherwise, his body would have tumbled down to the mouth of the mine. Wax from her candle dripped down her snout, burning a warning: *Continue on and your light too shall run out.* The candle was half-spent and flickering. She was hungry and tired, but there was no remedy. Shadows closed in around her rapidly. She cupped her paws around her mouth and shouted, "Tallow! Tallow, me come to rescue you! Where are you?"

Nothing. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Twig wiped her eyes and swung the pickax hard over her head. The metallic ring of steel striking stone clanged through the gaping passage and then transformed into a horrible rumble, tearing through the chasm like a snarl. The whole cavern began to quake. A crash like a scream and grinding rock overwhelmed Twig and threw her from the outcropping. She realized all too late that the scream was her own and the grinding rocks were the great gray fists of a cave-in much stronger than she. The falling debris struck her candle and her head, snuffing the flame out.



When Twig finally came to, she was shivering from the cold. All around her, there was darkness so deep and inscrutable that she could not tell left from right nor up from down. Her head ached, and she felt bruised all over, but she couldn't see her own limbs. And to make matters worse, she'd lost her grip on Granny's pickax. Whimpering, directionless, Twig curled into a fuzzy, dirty ball, eyes wide and taking in no light. She'd be lost forever to this still, cold oblivion. "Me sorry, Tallow. Sorry, Granny," she whispered, choking on dust and tears. "Twig's been snuffed out too."

"Snuffed ... out ... too?" a voice in the darkness asked weakly.

Twig sat up straight, turning her head aimlessly in the blackness.

"Snuffed out too?" She repeated, staring down the void with puffy red eyes.

"Snuffed ... out ... too ..."

As Twig crawled on all fours, hopefully in the right direction, her fingers brushed against a pathetic little lump half-hidden under the fallen rocks.

It was Tallow.

Summoning all her might, Twig dug the lost kobold free with her exhausted, scraped-up paws. She couldn't see him, but she could feel him.

"Me sorry, Twig," Tallow sobbed weakly. He fumbled for her arm and held on tightly once he found it. "Can we go home?"

Twig couldn't lie, but neither could she answer. They sat there for a while, in the total darkness, holding on to each other and a hope thinner than smoke.

Crestfallen, with her eyes cast low, Twig suddenly caught sight of faint hints of silver: a stream of light was reflecting off something metal, pointy, and curved. Granny's pickax lay a short distance away, illuminated like a beacon. Like a candle.

Twig grasped Tallow's hand, and they slowly made their way toward the pickax. Once closer, she could see a tiny pinprick in the craggy wall. A golden glow flowed from it, and Twig leveled her pickax. Tallow clung feebly to her as she hefted the ax high. She picked and she picked with every ounce of strength left in her.

And then—she broke through, into the light.

At first she could hardly look at anything. Her amber eyes squinted in the overwhelming brightness. While her vision adjusted, she felt the ground beneath her paws: it was oddly soft and warm. Plants sprouted beneath her and stretched farther than her stinging eyes could see. But even still, it was

beautiful. A short distance away from where Twig had broken through the ground, a river of sparkling, clean water babbled playfully over red and purple stones. Peaceful flowers swayed above the verdant earth, such a pure white color Twig had never known existed. The air was astonishingly fresh, without the slightest hint of must. And above it all blazed an enormous yellow flame that needed neither wick nor wax.



Twig pulled herself to her feet and stared up, mouth agape, at the great Wickless Candle. Even Tallow cracked open his eyes to stare in complete awe. Though it hurt to look at, she couldn't pull herself away. After all those sleep times, begging Granny to tell her the tale her papa hated most, here she was, standing beneath the purest candlelight she had always believed in. But even as she marveled in the light, Twig had another realization: she must bring the Wickless Candle back to the Whiskersnoot clan, back to her doubting papa and her deserving granny. But how?

Apart from the size of the flame, the Wickless Candle seemed to hang from an enormous blue ceiling that stretched on endlessly in all directions. She set Tallow down in a patch of white flowers and tried scaling the nearby boulders. Try as she might to scramble up them, she was still much too far away to reach the flame. A taller wooden structure looked promising, but even scampering up to the tippy top wouldn't bring the Wickless Candle to her grasp. She swung her Granny's pickax high as she could, but nothing connected. The Wickless Candle blazed on tirelessly and infinitely out of reach.

Unwilling to give up, Twig looked around. If she couldn't bring the Wickless Candle to her clan, she needed to entice them to come see it for themselves.

"Twig!" Tallow called, holding one of the white flowers. As he grasped it, all his scrapes and bruises healed before her eyes. How had this happened? And so quickly? Tallow brought the bloom to his snout and inhaled deeply. "Thank you, flower!"

Twig stopped and stooped over the patch of flowers to admire them. As she did, her head stopped hurting, and her bruises faded away. "Thank you, flowers," she breathed in wonder.

Their golden centers and bright white petals reminded her of the shape of the Wickless Candle. Perhaps they would do instead. Gently she pulled a single white flower free of its roots and tucked it into her knapsack. It was still warm from the Candle's shining light.

"Follow me, Tallow." Twig smiled and took the youngling's hand again. "We go home and show proof of Wickless Candle!"

"But we have to go through the darkness again." Tallow's ears folded back fearfully.

“Darkness didn’t snuff out Tallow or Twig. And we find candle that never burn out. We can be the light now and be brave.”

Legs driven by renewed confidence and hearts pumping with excitement swiftly carried Twig and Tallow hand in hand through the collapsed tunnel, down through the darkness that could stop them no longer, and back to the familiar embrace of glowing mushrooms and the echoing scrapes of shovels.

“Tallow is alive!” Twig cheered, scurrying down the halls. “Tallow is alive!”

“And the Wickless Candle is real!” chittered Tallow.

For a moment, Tallow’s presence was welcomed with surprise and relieved embraces, but the mood soon soured. Twig’s triumph was greeted by the solemn, mournful eyes of her papa as he stood with his paws folded before him. The rest of the Whiskersnoot kobolds hunched low and held their heads lower. While Twig was gone, Granny had fallen very ill. She was not long for this world.

Twig rushed to Granny’s side, dropping her pickax as she knelt. Granny lay nestled with several blankets piled atop her thin body—and even still, her paws were cold as Twig took them in her own. The old kobold’s eyes barely broke open to acknowledge her granddaughter’s presence.

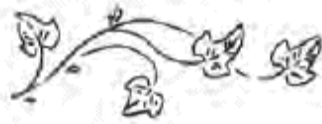
“Granny,” Twig choked, feeling her courage slip out uselessly between her teeth. “Me did it—me found Tallow. And me found the Wickless Candle. Have proof that Granny’s story is real.”

As if it would shatter at her touch, Twig tenderly lifted the peaceful bloom from her knapsack. “See? Still warm from Wickless Candle. Looks like it too.”

Slower than sweet syrup running down the edge of a mushroom cake, Granny ran her fingers over the petals. “I want ... to see it,” Granny choked. “Me wick is running low, low ... but me still have enough flame for this.”

In that moment, Twig felt struck with clarity. The flowers beneath the Wickless Candle had healed her and Tallow. There were plenty of flowers just outside the mouth of the tunnel she had created. Perhaps they would heal Granny too! Twig watched as Papa Whiskersnoot looked to his daughter and then to his dying mother.

“She should see the Wickless Candle,” he said.



Twig called a group of young tenderfoots to the center of the mine. “Friends! Tallow is back with us! Me know you doubted before, but me have proof of the Wickless Candle. And there are flowers that grow beneath it that saved Tallow and will save me granny! If trust me, and we all dig up together, we can save her quick-like. And you can all see the Wickless Candle for yourselves! Have courage, friends, have courage!”

There was silence for a time as decisions were made in little fuzzy heads. Then the tenderfoots all cheered and held their pickaxes high, nodding and wanting to see the undying flame above them. Twig jumped and thrust her fist in the air triumphantly. “Onward, Whiskersnoots! We dig above our snouts, but we dig careful! We look out for each other, and we will see the Wickless Candle!”

The youths speared their way through the rock and began to pick upward at Twig’s direction. Her original tunnel was far too twisting and small, but together they cleared the path to the Wickless Candle in no time. With some paws steadying the stone, others spotting for the diggers, and still more guiding pickaxes, they managed to avoid falling stones or cave-ins altogether. When they broke through the surface, they had made a sloping ramp up through the rock and into the shiny grass field wide enough for six kobolds to pass. Each of them was blinded at first by the brilliant light, but as their vision returned to them, they stood in wonder of the stunning world they had fearfully cast off for untold generations. Eyes finally unclouded by doubt, they admired the flowering fields, the pleasantly bubbling river, and the great Wickless Candle.

Behind them, the miners and Papa Whiskersnoot pushed Granny up the chasm in a mine cart filled with moss and blankets. She clasped the tiny flower in her folded paws atop her chest. Loving paws lifted Granny high and then laid her on the soft ground. The band of young kobolds wreathed her in the blooms, some forming chains of stems and draping them around her.

Eyes finally unclouded by doubt, they admired the flowering fields, the pleasantly bubbling river, and the great Wickless Candle.

“We here,” Twig whispered to Granny. “Wickless Candle is here.”

Granny’s eyes opened, and she stared up into the light of the great Wickless Candle. A gasp of awe escaped her lips, and tears welled in her eyes. Twig watched as all the years of endurance and rejection melted into a justified smile. She seemed to relax for the first time in Twig’s entire memory. But on the bed of peaceful white flowers, Granny’s breathing was still harsh, and her paws still quaked.

“What’s happening? Why no heal Granny?” Twig asked aloud, already looking to her right and left for more of the flowers. But Granny’s gentle paw turned Twig’s snout to face her. With a tear rolling down her long face, she was smiling wider than Twig had ever seen. Granny held her hand as tightly as her ailing muscles would allow.

“It is me time to go, Twig.” Surrounded by the glistening white petals, she was radiant. “Me life has been full, and fuller yet for loving Twig. Me wick has run out—me wax spent. But that only bring me closer to the Wickless Candle. Me can rest beneath its warm light, thanks to Twig.”

Twig held Granny Whiskersnoot’s hand long after her breathing had stopped. The Whiskersnoot kobolds gathered around Granny, pawing at her fur and brushing their cheeks against hers. Above them, the Wickless Candle burned brighter, bathing them all in its comforting embrace.




Even though Granny’s candle had gone out, Twig was grateful for Tallow’s safety and Papa Whiskersnoot’s newfound good faith. Every day, she would climb out of the darkness of the mines and sit beneath the Wickless Candle, thinking fondly of her granny. She watched the brilliant flame float about the

blue ceiling, moving from one edge of the horizon to the other, never flickering or fading. Twig wondered where it was going, what adventure it was on with her granny. On a particularly stunning morning, courageous Twig set out to follow the Wickless Candle. With Granny's pickax in hand, she took to the hills, plateaus, and mountains of Azeroth, scaling the tallest peaks she could find. Each pick above her snout brought her closer to the Wickless Candle, closer to her granny, and out into the light.




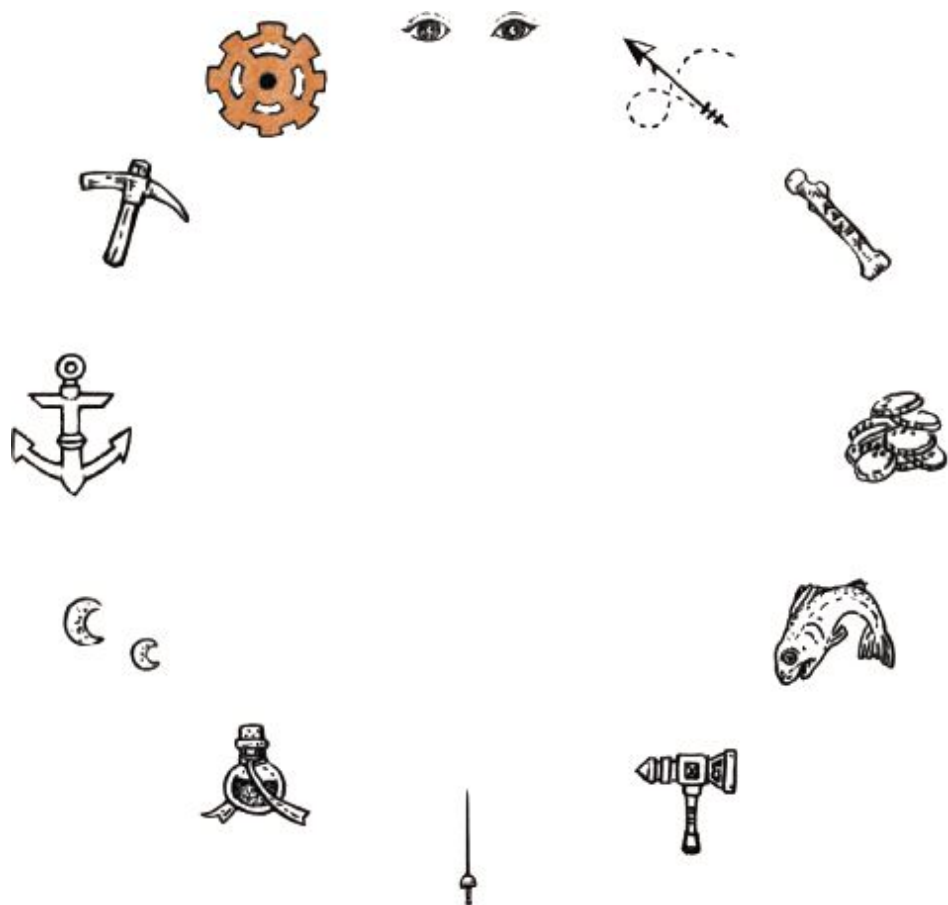
VISAGE DAY

BY STEVE DANUSER



ILLUSTRATED BY
LINDSEY BURCAR







hronormu stirred with the first

glimmer of the rising sun. He yawned and stretched and smiled upon the wonders of the waking world. A frigid breeze blew a dusting of snowflakes into his roost through the open arch that framed its entrance. Here, nestled high upon the mountainside, the cold was welcoming, familiar. Chronormu walked sleepily to the ledge and looked out upon the endless fields of snow and ice that stretched all the way to Wymrest Temple, the grand spire rising far in the distance. As if to greet him on this new day, the glowering clouds parted, and rays of sunlight shone down to warm his bronze scales.

It is a good day to be a dragon! he told himself, as he did every morning. And yet, something in his otherwise happy heart squirmed, a nagging bit of discontent that left him feeling rather out of place.

A shimmer in the heavens caught his eye, small at first, growing larger as another bronze dragon approached his roost. Chronormu smiled when he recognized his dearest friend.

“Zidormi, good morning! Have you brought breakfast? Please say yes.” Just the thought of food caused a rumble in Chronormu’s empty tummy.

The elegant bronze landed with a graceful flourish upon the ledge and grinned, offering a playful toss of her head. “No, silly. I came to hear your decision. Tell me what form you will be choosing!”

All at once the rumble turned to knots. Chronormu’s brow furrowed into an embarrassed frown.

Zidormi’s jaw fell agape. “Chronormu! It is less than a fortnight until your Visage Day! You mean you *still* have not decided on a mortal form?”

It had been such a cool, bright, beautiful morning that the thought had simply not entered Chronormu’s mind. Well, of course it *had*, but he paid it no attention in the hopes that it would flutter away and leave him in peace. And for a few precious minutes, it had obliged. But no longer.

Chronormu slumped, his long neck craning downward as his head came to rest upon folded claws. “Oh, Zidormi, I can’t make up my mind! There are so many possibilities, and just when I think I’ve made a decision, a different choice pops into my head. And what if I make the wrong choice? Please, tell me what you would do.”

“I just don’t know how I’m supposed to choose how others see me, when I’m not even sure how I see myself.”

Zidormi sighed and allowed the corners of her mouth to curl into a comforting smile. “We both know that I cannot choose for you. My own Visage Day is still several seasons away.”

Chronormu chuffed, a plume of pale smoke rising from his nostrils. “I bet you already know what mortal form you’re picking, don’t you?”

“I did not fly all the way to your roost to talk about *my* choice, Chronormu.”

“But I’m right, aren’t I?”

Zidormi stopped herself from protesting again, aside from a brief huff of surrender. “Well, yes, but—”

“I *knew* it!” wailed Chronormu as he craned his neck from side to side in frustration. “Decisions come so easily for you. I bet you even know what duties you’ll request, where you’ll go, who you’ll bond with, when you’ll—”

“Stop!” she cried. But when Zidormi saw the tears falling from her friend’s wide green eyes, she sighed and leaned her face in close to nuzzle him. “There, there, my dearest Chronormu, no more fretting.”

The young dragon sobbed. “I just don’t know how I’m supposed to choose how others see me, when I’m not even sure how I see myself.”

Zidormi spoke with a quiet calm. “When our master, the Timeless One, faces a difficult decision, how do you suppose he settles it?”

The thought succeeded in distracting him. “He probably asks for advice from his fellow Aspects.”

“And our master is very wise, is he not?”

Chronormu gave a solemn nod. “The wisest.”

Zidormi smiled. “So I suggest you seek his counsel. Nozdormu has helped countless of our dragonflight prepare for their Visage Days—I’m certain he will do the same for you.”

Chronormu’s heart swelled with relief and joy. It felt good to have some direction. He folded his wings around his wonderful friend and gave Zidormi the biggest hug he could muster.

“I will, I promise. But will you have breakfast with me first? This is far too important a discussion to have on an empty stomach!”



This time I’m going to do it!

Chronormu lowered his nose and began yet another descent. Gradually the vast icy expanse of the Dragonblight grew smaller and smaller, its countless deep crags and mounds of half-buried bones fading from view as he approached the low ridge of cliffs that encircled the Bronze Dragonshrine, a sacred place where Nozdormu the Timeless One was known to sit vigil among dragons long laid to rest.

But as the ground rushed closer, so did Chronormu’s doubts, and at the last moment he once again angled his wings upward and soared high into the sky. He resumed a wide arc far above the perimeter of the shrine.

Perhaps it was best if he put off his meeting with Nozdormu until the morrow. After all, Chronormu told himself, the Bronze Aspect was a very

busy dragon indeed and no doubt had many important matters to oversee. But just as he had all but convinced himself to fly home to his roost, Chronormu's mind drifted back to a lecture his master had given only the season before.

"The Sands of Time are plentiful but precious. Waste not a single grain."

Chronormu blushed at the memory. He was being silly, of course. The bronze dragons were the caretakers of the timeways; he knew well that once set into motion, time is not apt to stop or slow down simply because one desires it. He could be prepared for his Visage Day, or he could dawdle.

So he stretched his wings wide and let the air currents guide him gently to the ground, ignoring the sideways glances and bemused giggles of the drakes and whelpings at play around the outskirts of the shrine who had borne witness to his repeated indecision. Chronormu raised his head high and walked past them with feigned confidence, offering only a sagely nod. *They'll be no less nervous than I when their Visage Day draws near*, he assured himself.

As he walked the winding path upward to the crest of the ridge, Chronormu drew in a long, calming breath of cool air and held it. The natural stone walkway sloped downward and became a wide, chiseled stair leading to the sandy vale of the shrine. He exhaled when he reached the last step, and the next breath he took was impossibly warm, the air bathed in the golden light of this magical oasis. It was as if some pocket of the past were preserved here from a time when the climate of Northrend had been sunny and warm—or perhaps pulled from a future that had not yet come to pass. Either way, it was resplendent and wondrous, tangible proof of the Timeless One's power. And there Nozdormu sat, alone in the middle of the shrine, adrift upon a sea of sand and dragon bones. Quiet. Contemplative. His mind no doubt focused upon an infinity of moments along the timeways.

Chronormu approached slowly, head lowered in reverence. "Master Nozdormu, may I speak to you?"

"Of course, Chronormu. Join me in the sand." His voice managed to be wise and welcoming all at once.



Whenever Nozdormu sat within the sands, intricate patterns formed around him of their own accord. The smaller dragon stepped carefully so as to cause as little disruption as he could. Chronormu thought these curling designs were more beautiful than fine artwork, in part because they were so fragile. But even still, they held their own unique shape, down to the

smallest spiral. Chronormu felt a pang of envy in his heart that the sand seemed surer of itself than he was.

Chronormu sat down facing the Timeless One, feeling very trifling indeed. Just being in the presence of the leader of their dragonflight, who had witnessed so many momentous events over the many ages, made the younger dragon feel smaller than a speck of sand.

A shared moment of serenity passed between them before the young dragon ruined it entirely.

“Well, Master Nozdormu, my Visage Day is coming very soon, as you know. I mean *of course* you know—you’re the Timeless One, so you’ve seen what’s about to happen, has happened, and is yet to come. But I’m just a young, unimportant bronze dragon, and I have no idea what’s coming—I’m not even sure what form to choose. I was hoping that since you know the future, maybe you could tell me what form I *will* choose or what future me *did* choose, which isn’t really cheating since you know it’s going to happen anyway. And yes, you have rules about that sort of thing, but maybe just this once you could find a way to—”

“Chronormu,” the ancient dragon said firmly but not unkindly.

“Yes?”

“Breathe.”

Chronormu inhaled slowly, steadily. He thought if he could make it last long enough, he might forget how mortified he felt.

“Sorry about that,” he said quietly.

Nozdormu’s voice flowed like the sweeping sands. “No bronze dragon is small or unimportant. Please, tell me what Visage Day means to you.”

“It shows that you and the other Aspects trust me to adopt the form of one of the mortal races and walk among their kind. And the better I can relate to them, the more I can help them understand us dragons. That’s why picking the right visage is so important. I want them to see me for me, not just the scales and fangs that I wear.”

Nozdormu nodded his huge bronze head, and with a slow blink of his eyes, his entire form was enveloped within a cloud of shimmering golden magic. As the moments passed, the cloud grew smaller and smaller until it abated, leaving behind not the gigantic silhouette of a dragon, but the form of a brown-bearded high elf.

Even in this form, the Timeless One retained his elegance and austerity. He looked like some ancient king, possessing a regal bearing that radiated confidence and wisdom. The mortal armor he wore was inlaid with bronze scales, and upon his right shoulder was a pauldron shaped like a dragon's head that held a glass vial of ever-flowing sand.

Chronormu was dumbstruck, certain that he could never assume a form so noble.

The elf gestured, and the sands beneath his feet began shifting once again. "Since we Aspects first realized our kind was destined to share Azeroth with the young races, we have each taken a visage that allowed us to see the world as they do. Just as importantly, it informs how they perceive us. Do you wish them to see you as a trustworthy sage? A tyrant to be feared? Distant and aloof, or warm and generous? This choice is deeply personal, and it says much about who you are as a dragon. So no, I will not tell you anything that might sway your decision."

Chronormu sighed. "I understand," he said, and he truly did. But his uncertainty over choosing a mortal form—and indeed, who he was as a dragon—still troubled him.

"Instead, I offer this advice," Nozdormu continued. "Seek out others who have chosen a form. Not just friends, but those you do not yet know. Even those you might be fearful of. Listen to the truths that guided their choices, and you may find that in the process, your own path will become clear."

"Thank you, Master. I will do as you suggest." This wasn't the easy answer Chronormu had been hoping for, but it was a good answer.

"The sands will guide you, young one," Nozdormu said, sitting down in the warm golden light and turning back to his thoughts.

As Chronormu backed away toward the stairs, he paused to watch the Timeless One in his meditation. Still appearing mortal, he sat within the deep impression his dragon form had left upon the sand. It seemed to Chronormu that it didn't matter how the Aspect presented himself—he filled the sand all the same.

The young bronze dragon leaped into the air and soared upward, an idea already forming in his mind.



Chronormu flew high and fast, watching the frigid terrain of Dragonblight give way to the steamy geyser fields and rust-colored scrub grass of the rolling tundra, toward a distant haze of blue in the western sky. Gradually the glow grew brighter, more defined, until it formed a beacon of light that seemed to pierce the sky itself. He soared higher toward the tall cliffs of jagged stone that surrounded Coldarra, bastion of the blue dragonflight.

The young dragon crested the high peaks and gazed with awe upon the Nexus, a massive tower of floating rings encircling a thick pillar of arcane energy. Chronormu had heard stories of the wonders contained within that stronghold: ancient artifacts granted to the Aspects by the will of the titans themselves. Cohorts of large blue dragons flew in patrols around the structure, their synchronized arcs flowing with practiced precision.

Not wishing to disrupt the graceful blues, Chronormu glided in low, choosing to land upon a ridge that overlooked fields of snow dotted with clumps of tall pines. A purple light infused the air, with the sound of arcane magic crackling softly in the bronze dragon's ears. Drakes and dragons conjured bolts of energy, honing the magic prowess for which their flight was known.

Chronormu spotted an azure dragon soaring toward him from the upper reaches of the Nexus. With almost regal grace, the blue landed so smoothly that he barely disturbed the soil beneath his claws.

"You must be Chronormu," the dragon said with a polite bow of his head. "I am Kalecgos. It is an honor to meet you."

The bronze bowed his head in response. "Delighted, Kalecgos! Zidormi speaks highly of you. Thank you for taking the time to see me. I can tell you're very busy."

Kalecgos smiled. There was something calm and gentle about him. "My master, Malygos, expects members of our flight to train relentlessly. But I can always find time to do a favor for a friend. Zidormi informed me that you seek guidance about your upcoming Visage Day?"

Chronormu gave a sober nod. "Indeed, and it is fast approaching. I find myself torn over which mortal form best represents who I am. I sought out

my own master, and he suggested I try to learn from others who had already made their decision. If I may ask, Kalecgos, how did you choose a form?”

The blue dragon closed his eyes and whispered an incantation. Swirls of arcane magic cascaded around him as Kalecgos assumed his mortal guise. When the transformation was finished, Chronormu remained politely silent.

“What do you think of my choice?” asked the slight, blue-haired ... elf? Human? Whatever he was, Kalecgos was dressed in a simple white shirt tucked into unexceptional brown trousers and boots. For such an elaborate transformation, the result was rather mundane.

“A most distinguished form indeed!” Chronormu tried to mask his confusion with enthusiasm.

Kalecgos chuckled. “Be honest, my young friend. It is not what you expected, am I right?”

The bronze dragon blushed. “It’s just that ... knowing how magical you blues are, and having caught a glimpse or two of Malygos in *his* fancy mortal form, I guess I expected something with a bit more ...”

“Grandeur? It’s fine, Chronormu. Really.” His warm smile put the bronze at ease. “In fact, the contrast to other members of my flight is exactly why I made this choice.”

Chronormu blinked. Then blinked again. “I don’t understand.”

“Well,” the blue began, “there are any number of reasons for selecting a particular form. The Aspects command the respect of our flights, and of mortals as well, so their guises serve a necessary function. They need to be elaborate and formal because that is what we expect of them. Yes?”

That made sense. The bronze nodded.

“While many of my flight follow the example of the Aspects, I seek to walk beside the mortals as an equal. I chose a visage that is half-human and half-elf: a blend of mortal worlds, as I try to be a blend of our world and theirs. I didn’t want my appearance to remind them of a dragon. I wanted them to see me as a friend, a peer, someone they can trust. I would say that was the heart of my choice and my identity, Chronormu: I chose to be approachable.”

That made *a lot* of sense. “And the blue hair?”

Kalecgos shrugged. “It suits me.”

“Understandable,” Chronormu replied. “Thank you for speaking with me today, Kalecgos. You have been even kinder than Zidormi said you would

be.”

The half-elf smiled. “It was my pleasure. May I offer two other suggestions before you go?”

“Sure!” Chronormu blurted out, his eyes wide.

“First, I have noticed that dragon names can sound a bit formal for mortals. If you choose to walk among them as an ally, I suggest thinking about a ... Oh, what is that they call it? *A nickname*. For example, when in the company of mortals, I go by the name Kalec.”

“Really? I do like that idea. I’ll think about it. What is your other suggestion?”

Kalecgos cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve given you advice from my point of view. But other dragons often see themselves and their interactions with mortals quite differently. I suggest you seek the wisdom of someone whose perspective varies from my own.”

Chronormu knew the advice was sound. He thought of other dragons who had made an impression on him and tried to picture one who was as different from Kalecgos as possible. When the name struck him, his carefree demeanor turned grim.

The half-elf stroked his chin. “It would seem you have a dragon in mind for your next visit.”

The bronze sighed. “In fact, I do.”



The dark-scaled drakonid shuffled toward Chronormu, its voice a low, grating growl. “My mistress will see you now. Follow.”

The bronze dragon, feeling woefully out of place, swallowed hard. The drakonid were servants of dragonkind, a burly, bipedal race fashioned by their masters to be helpful and loyal. Never had one frightened him before. But here, in these ashy-aired caverns tucked away in a shadowy corner of the Dragonblight, the young dragon felt very frightened indeed.

As the black drakonid turned and led him toward the gaping mouth of one of the tunnels that wound their way deep into the volcanic mountainside,

Chronormu's fear turned to pity. The creature seemed worn, haggard, one of its legs dragging slightly behind it.

Why does his mistress not heal him? the bronze dragon wondered. The only notions that came to mind were unsettling at best. And as he walked and the drakonid limped along, Chronormu saw others like his escort who labored near seething pools of lava, or who pulled heavy carts full of ore—and all of them seemed overworked and bedraggled. There was no joy here, no happiness. Only obedience.

The tunnel opened into a vast chamber lit by braziers of flame and flowing streams of lava that settled into burning pools. More drakonid were scattered about, some laboring, others sparring with obsidian drakes who practiced their martial skills. The young dragons attacked fiercely, and Chronormu realized why so many of the servants seemed wounded.

The black flight practices how best to inflict pain. The thought of it filled his heart with sorrow and shame.

Chronormu walked slowly so as not to outpace his guide. The tunnel twisted and turned past outcroppings of jagged stone that looked more than a little like malformed dragon teeth before opening into a cave where the air grew increasingly thick and foul. He felt as if he were under dark, heavy water, and the bronze suppressed the urge to flee.

You're safe, Chronormu. You're among your own people. There's no reason to be afraid. Yet hoping to convince yourself of something was not the same as truly believing it, he knew.

Upon an island of dark stone at the center of the cave perched a great black dragon. She was commanding. Imperious. She craned her massive head to and fro, the polished surface of her curved horns reflecting the firelight, ensuring that no one in her charge shirked their duties. The drakonid led their bronze guest along a narrow obsidian walkway that snaked back and forth toward the black dragon. Chronormu slowed as he drew closer, struck by reverence as well as fear.

"Mistress, I bring the outsider seeking an audience." Her servant was kneeling so low as to almost be sprawled upon the rock. The dragon turned and regarded the drakonid with piercing yellow eyes. Eyes that soon fixed their catlike pupils upon Chronormu.

The bronze dragon searched for a proper greeting and stumbled. "Hello, my lady. Thank you for—"

“Is that how you show respect to the daughter of an Aspect?” Her voice was hard, demanding.

The young bronze knelt low, head bowed even lower. “Forgive me. Thank you for seeing me, Lady Onyxia.”

The black dragon seemed satisfied. “You may rise and state your name.”

“I am Chronormu. I bring you greetings from the bronze dragonflight and the best wishes of the Timeless One.” He rose as his hostess had ordered, but he was conscious of a wobble in his legs.

Onyxia didn’t so much as blink. “I trust you did not come all this way to offer trite platitudes, little dragon. Tell me what you seek.”

Chronormu’s mouth felt very dry. “Your counsel, my lady,” he answered softly.

“Indeed?” Her demeanor shifted, her posture becoming more relaxed. But whether from genuine interest or mere bemusement, the young dragon couldn’t guess. “Go on.”

“Heed my wisdom, little one: you are a dragon, a hunter, with claws for tearing and teeth for killing. No visage will change that.”

Chronormu drew in a breath. He had prepared a long explanation punctuated with deference and humor, but even with Onyxia’s seeming benevolence, he didn’t want to linger in these sepulchral caverns any longer than he had to. “My Visage Day approaches, and I’m uncertain what form to take. I hoped to learn how you came to your own decision.”

The black dragon remained still for several uncomfortable moments, then broke the silence with a question. “Why do we choose a visage?” she asked.

“To better relate to the mortal races,” the bronze replied. “To be approachable, and to commune with their kind.”

Onyxia scoffed, a plume of dark smoke rising from her nostrils. “That sounds like something Nozdormu would teach his whelps. No, little dragon.

We choose a visage that allows us to control them.”

The massive black dragon stretched her wings wide and reared up on her hind legs. Chronormu’s mouth fell agape as Onyxia’s form seemed to fill the entirety of the massive chamber. She held her pose a moment, then drew her wings in with such force that a cloud of ash came rushing toward Chronormu. The bronze dragon coughed and gasped, eyes burning from the soot. When he finally blinked the tears away, Onyxia was no longer in her dragon form, but in the guise of a raven-haired human woman dressed in fine robes.

“Of all the mortal races, it is humans who pose the greatest threat to dragonkind,” she said. “They are neither the strongest nor the smartest, but they are the most relentless. Yet for all their cleverness, they are vain creatures bent by flattery. I chose a form that would quicken their heartbeats and allow me to seize all that I desire from them. Heed my wisdom, little one: you are a dragon, a hunter, with claws for tearing and teeth for killing. No visage will change that. And just like your other gifts, your visage will be a means to take what you want.”

Chronormu felt as though his breath had been punched from his lungs, and he didn’t quite know what to say. “That ... that is not how I want mortals to see me.”

The faintest hint of a smile formed on Onyxia’s human lips. She drew closer to Chronormu, reaching out her porcelain hand to stroke the bronze’s neck. She spoke slowly, softly. “You cannot change your nature, little dragon. If you stay here at my side, I will teach you all you need to know about mortals. With my training, and by choosing the ideal form, you will become the greatest of your flight. Even the Timeless One will one day kneel before you.”

As her cruel words twisted in Chronormu’s belly, the young dragon realized she was merely toying with him. He stepped backward, recoiling from her cloying touch. “Your offer is most ... kind, Lady Onyxia. I have learned much from you already, I think. But I must be going.”

The woman laughed, her voice booming like the dragon she was. “A pity you lack the spine to embrace the truth, little one. You will always be small and insignificant. Befriend mortals, and one day they will be the death of you.”

Chronormu didn't wait for an escort. He turned and fled, hoping with all his heart that he remembered which tunnel would lead him back to the open air. Behind him, peals of laughter echoed through the chamber. The sound pursued him as he raced through passages of dark stone, only relenting when he finally escaped the clutches of the caverns and could breathe the cold night air once more.

He collapsed upon a deep drift of fresh powdery snow that cleaned the soot from his scales. Tears filled his eyes, an outpouring of sorrow and fear and relief. He had never felt so horrible to be a dragon as he had in that cave. But whatever Lady Onyxia's intent, Chronormu had learned something from her.

"I know what *I* want to be," he said aloud. And though the words trembled from his lips, Chronormu's heart was strong and determined.



Stand still. Don't you fidget! Don't you pace! The ceremony will begin soon!

Chronormu's head was a blur of thoughts and feelings. His tummy felt like it was packed with anxious whelpings playing a game of ringchase. It was here at last. His Visage Day.

Tradition dictated that the ceremony be held at the summit of Wyrmmrest Temple, the enormous tower of pale gray stone from which the Aspects could look out upon all Dragonblight. He had expected Nozdormu's presence, as was befitting members of his flight. But when Chronormu was told that the Dragon Queen herself would be officiating, he nearly fainted on the spot.

Alexstrasza! At my Visage Day! The thought did nothing to quiet the tummy whelpings.

So instead, he looked around at those gathered. Dear Zidormi had arrived early, of course, and had done her best to settle his nerves. The bronze flight was most heavily represented, including many friendly faces that Chronormu had known all his life. Each flight had sent emissaries, as was customary. There were red dragons, green dragons, and blue dragons. Even Lady Onyxia had come, along with an entourage, though her flight was clearly out

of favor with the others. Nozdormu stared off into the distance, unmoving, awaiting the intended moment to begin.

“Hello again, Chronormu.”

The young bronze had been so consumed by his own thoughts that he hadn’t noticed the friendly blue dragon walk up to his side.

“Kalecgos! It’s wonderful to see you again! Thank you for coming.” Joy and relief washed over Chronormu, and he wrapped the blue in a big, happy hug. It wasn’t traditional, but it soothed his fretting mind just a bit.

The dragon smiled. “I wouldn’t dream of missing it. I look forward to your proclamation.”

My proclamation. Chronormu had recited the words aloud to himself a hundred times over, not to mention the particulars of the visage spell, but he was still certain he’d blunder them in front of everyone, including the Dragon Queen. He managed a grin and an awkward chuckle as he fought the urge to flee.

“It is time,” Nozdormu announced simply and plainly, yet the words rang out over the small talk of those gathered.

The other dragons fanned out around the periphery of the open-air chamber, while Chronormu stood at the center, facing the Timeless One. All was silent, and the young bronze felt a sudden rush of panic. *Are they waiting for me to say something? What happens next?*

As if in response, a sprawling shadow blocked the shimmering green light radiating from above as slowly, gracefully, the Dragon Queen descended from the sky and took her place at Nozdormu’s side. Chronormu had seen Alexstrasza from a distance many times. Up close, the Life-Binder was a vision in her crimson scales and sweeping horns adorned with gold, but it was her warmth and compassion that the young dragon truly admired.

“Come forth, Chronormu the Bronze,” she said, her voice a gentle song.

The young dragon walked forward at a measured pace. The cool stone was a comfort against his nervous claws. He stopped just before reaching the two Aspects.

Alexstrasza leaned in close, speaking softly so that only Chronormu could hear. “I am told you had doubts regarding your decision, young one. If you would like, I can postpone the ceremony for another time.” She smiled warmly. “Know that I only desire what is best for you, my child.”

Chronormu wasn't sure he had ever felt so understood, so loved. He nodded. "I am ready, my queen. And it would be the greatest honor of my life if you would proceed with the ceremony."

Alexstrasza nodded to him, then spoke aloud to all the guests. "Many ages have passed since we dragons first peered down from our roosts and watched the young mortal races begin to spread across Azeroth. As we saw their villages grow into cities, and their cities become kingdoms, the timeways told us that we must find a way to live alongside them. And so it was decided that we would each assume a form that would allow us to walk freely among their kind and see this world as they do."

The Life-Binder turned back to the small dragon before her. "And now, Chronormu the Bronze, in honor of your Visage Day, those of us who have chosen a form will assume it now."

With those words she gestured, and many of those in attendance, the queen included, transformed into their mortal guises. Alexstrasza was a beautiful high elf with scarlet hair and gold adorning her horns. Nozdormu stood once more in his austere elven form. And as Chronormu looked around, he saw the smiling faces of humans, night elves, tauren, and other mortal races. It was wondrous. It was breathtaking.

The queen's words reclaimed his attention. "The hour is at hand, Chronormu. Face your kin and make your proclamation."

He swallowed hard, bowing his head to Alexstrasza in thanks. Then he turned toward those who had joined him on this special day and began to speak the words he had practiced.

"Dear friends, honored kin, it warms my heart to look around and see all those who have supported me throughout my life. Who have guided me through trials and shared my joys and sorrows. I know it may not always have been easy"—he gave Zidormi a sheepish glance—"but you stood by me all the same. And for that, I thank you. Many of you know that this has not been ... it has not been ..." Chronormu stammered, his mind racing with doubt.

He looked at Nozdormu and expected a stern glare. He saw only pride. He looked at Alexstrasza and expected to see pity. He saw only caring. His gaze turned from one dragon to another, and in all their eyes, he saw only warmth and love.

Chronormu put aside his practiced speech and spoke from his heart.

“This hasn’t been an easy choice to make. For a long time, I thought something must be wrong with me, because for everyone else the decision seemed to come naturally. So I sought counsel from friends, my honored teachers, and some ...” He looked straight into Lady Onyxia’s eyes without flinching. “Well, some who maybe weren’t my friends but taught me lessons all the same. And at last I understood what this choice truly meant.

“It’s not just about how we wish for others to perceive us—it’s about how we see ourselves and how we experience this world alongside those we share it with. And I realized I don’t want to look upon Azeroth or the mortals that inhabit her through the eyes of a hero or a conqueror. I want to see it as the smallest among them, but also the most optimistic. I want to be someone who could do her best to build a brighter future—while respecting the laws of the timeways, of course!” He gave Nozdormu a quick nod, which the Timeless One returned with a smile.

“And so my proclamation is ...” Chronormu closed his eyes and whispered the words of the incantation that would define his mortal form. Bronze magic shimmered all about him, enveloping him, until his dragon form disappeared within the glittering cloud.

Then all at once it faded, and there, before two Aspects and a crowd of beloved friends, stood a tiny gnome woman in a white robe trimmed with gold.

“Hi there! You can call me Chromie!” she said.

A cheer arose from all those gathered, and the little gnome basked in the smile of the Dragon Queen.

“It is good to meet you, Chromie,” Alexstrasza said. “Welcome home.”

Zidormi was the first to embrace her dear friend, taking great care not to bruise Chromie’s tiny form. Nozdormu told her that she had made a wise choice, though he refused to say if he had known all along what her decision would be. Lady Onyxia said nothing, but before departing the festivities, she offered the young bronze the slightest of nods, which Chromie chose to take as a sign of acceptance.

Kalec, his half-elven visage still adorned in his humble attire, walked up to Chromie and offered a stately bow. “You came to me, as well as others, for advice. So why is it I feel that we are the ones who were taught a lesson?”

She chuckled. “Perhaps we all have things to learn from one another.”

The blue dragon nodded. “I believe I understand why you chose to take the form of a gnome. But if I may ask, why did you choose to become female as well?”

Chromie smiled. “It suits me,” she said, and shared with Kalec a long, happy hug.

And with that, a glorious day unfolded into a glorious evening. The dragons danced and feasted and sang the songs of old, and the young bronze went to bed that night feeling more whole, and more joyful, than she ever had before.

The next morning, Chromie stirred with the first glimmer of the rising sun. She yawned and stretched and smiled upon the wonders of the waking world.



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Named one of The Root's and BET's 100 most influential African Americans of 2020, Leatrice "Elle" McKinney, writing as L.L. McKinney, is an advocate for equality and inclusion in publishing, and the creator of the hashtags #PublishingPaidMe and #WhatWoC Writers Hear. A gamer and Blerd, her works include the Nightmare-Verse books, *Nubia: Real One* through DC, Marvel's *Black Widow: Bad Blood*, and more.

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Garth Nix has been a full-time writer since 2001, but he has also worked as a literary agent, marketing consultant, book editor, book publicist, book sales representative, bookseller, and part-time soldier in the Australian Army Reserve. Garth's books include the Old Kingdom fantasy series; the science fiction novels *Shade's Children* and *A Confusion of Princes*; a Regency romance with magic, *Newt's Emerald*; and sixty short-fiction works for adults and children.

More than six million copies of Garth's books have been sold around the world, in forty-two languages. They have appeared on the bestseller lists of the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *The Bookseller*. He has won multiple Aurealis Awards, the Ditmar Award, the Mythopoeic Award, and the CBCA Honour Book, and he has been shortlisted for the Locus Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, and others.

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Tamsyn Muir is the bestselling author of the *Locked Tomb* trilogy, which begins with *Gideon the Ninth*, continues with *Harrow the Ninth*, and concludes with *Alecto the Ninth*. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Nebula Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Eugie Foster Memorial Award. A Kiwi, she has spent most of her life in Howick, New Zealand, with time living in Waiuku and central Wellington. She currently lives and works in Oxford, in the United Kingdom.

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Allison Irons is an editor at Blizzard Entertainment by day and a writer by night. With several smash hits under their editorial belt, they are translating their skill in refining prose to creating it. Allison earned a bachelor's degree with honors in English from California State University, Fullerton. They live in Southern California with their partner, Kris, and a little gray cat, where they spend most of their free time painting wargaming miniatures and playing games where you can be nice to the NPCs.

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A veteran of nearly two decades in game development, Steve Danuser leads narrative design on the *World of Warcraft* team. He develops a wide variety of story-driven content, working with the game's quest and dungeon designers, Blizzard's cinematics group, and the company's Story and Franchise Development team on the characters and story lines that drive the game.

When Steve is not writing epic stories for Blizzard, he likes to dabble in photography, specifically landscapes and wildlife, and cooking, where he continues his dual quests to sear the perfect steak and bake the ultimate homemade pizza.

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